# The California Sunday Magazine

Ashley. Age 15. American Mexican.

**"SOMETIMES, WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME WHERE I'M FROM, I DON'T KNOW HOW TO RESPOND."**

— LESLY MANTILLA

# More than 600,000 U.S.-born children of undocumented parents live in Mexico. What happens when you return to a country you've never known?

*By Brooke Jarvis*
*Photographs by Livia Corona Benjamin*

Javier, 13, overlooking Tijuana. He is an American citizen.

ON THE COVER
Ashley Mantilla walking home from school

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**"AFTER WE MARRIED, I WOULD ASK HIM, 'WILL YOU ABANDON ME?'"**

**For Rohingya women in refugee camps, marriage is both an escape and a trap.**

*By Wudan Yan*
*Photographs by Salma Abedin Prithi and Sarker Protick*

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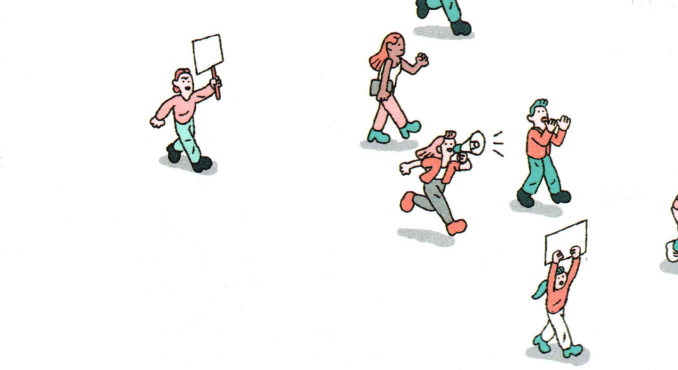
**MAKING CUCO HAPPEN**

**Omar Banos found fame streaming angsty pop songs from his bedroom. Now he's a model for how musicians can thrive, unsigned.**

*By Dylan Tupper Rupert*
*Photographs by Stefan Ruiz*



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**FREEDOM IS _____.**

**It's the essential American ideal. We just can't agree on what it means. Our correspondent hits the road in search of answers.**

*By Chris Colin*
*Artwork by Lola Dupré, Lizzie Gill, Priya Kambli, Kensuke Koike, Balint Zsako, and James Zucco*

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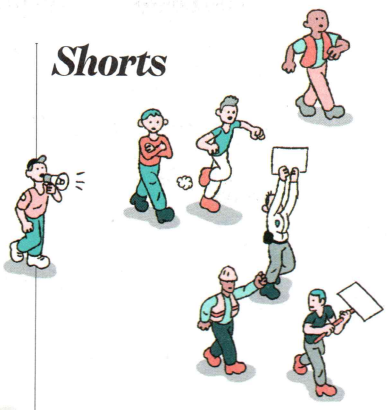
## *Shorts*



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**THE TECH REVOLT**

**A sometimes pointed, sometimes resigned conversation with engineers, designers, research scientists, and job candidates who are pushing for a more ethical Silicon Valley**

*Interviews by Cameron Bird, Sean Captain, Elise Craig, Haley Cohen Gilliland, and Joy Shan*
*Illustrations by Tim Peacock*

## *End*

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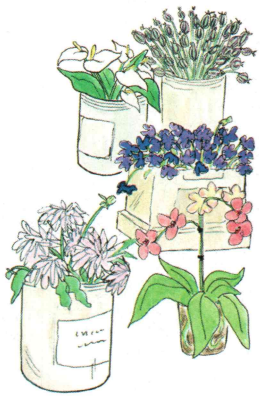
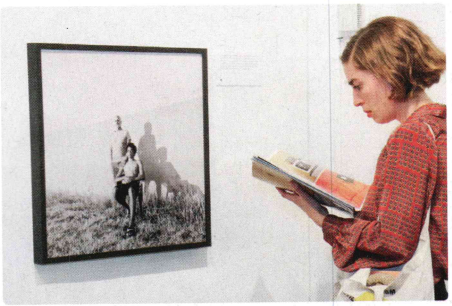
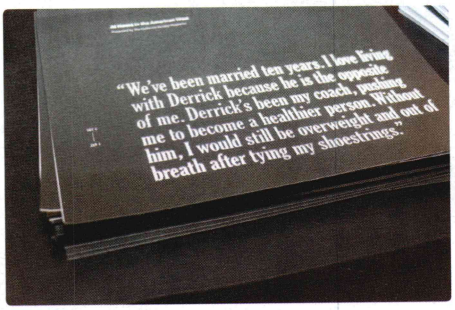
**Stopping to Smell the Roses in the Flower District**

*By Hallie Bateman*






"We've been married ten years. I love living with Derrick because he is the opposite of me. Derrick's been my coach, pushing me to become a healthier person. Without him, I would still be overweight and out of breath after tying my shoestrings."

**A few weeks ago, we tried something new. We turned one of our cover stories, a photo essay, into an art exhibition. The show, curated by our endlessly creative photography director, Jacqueline Bates, featured the work of 20 remarkable artists who traveled across the American West searching for stories of home, plus dozens of intimate, recorded interviews with the folks they met along the way.**

Hundreds of people showed up for the opening at Aperture Gallery.

One of my favorite things about magazine journalism these days is that it's an open question what a magazine is — what all a magazine might be. Sometimes it's a collection of memorable stories, and photography, and illustration in print or on a screen. Sometimes it's theater, or sound, or an art show. At least, that's the way we think about it.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS BOLLIER, JENNIFER O'KEEFFE, AND MADISON REID / COURTESY OF APERTURE

If you missed our exhibition in New York, good news: It's headed to Los Angeles at the end of April, part of Photoville LA at the Annenberg Space for Photography. If you're in town, check it out and let us know what you think.

Doug

EDITOR IN CHIEF


*The California Sunday Magazine* is produced by Pop-Up Magazine Productions and distributed to select areas through paid agreements with major daily newspapers. We're big fans of the newspapers (their reporters, editors, etc.), but they are not involved in creating the magazine. Learn more at californiasunday.com.

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**CORRECTION**

*Mariela Hernandez was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, not Las Vegas. ("The Midterms," October 7, 2018, issue)*

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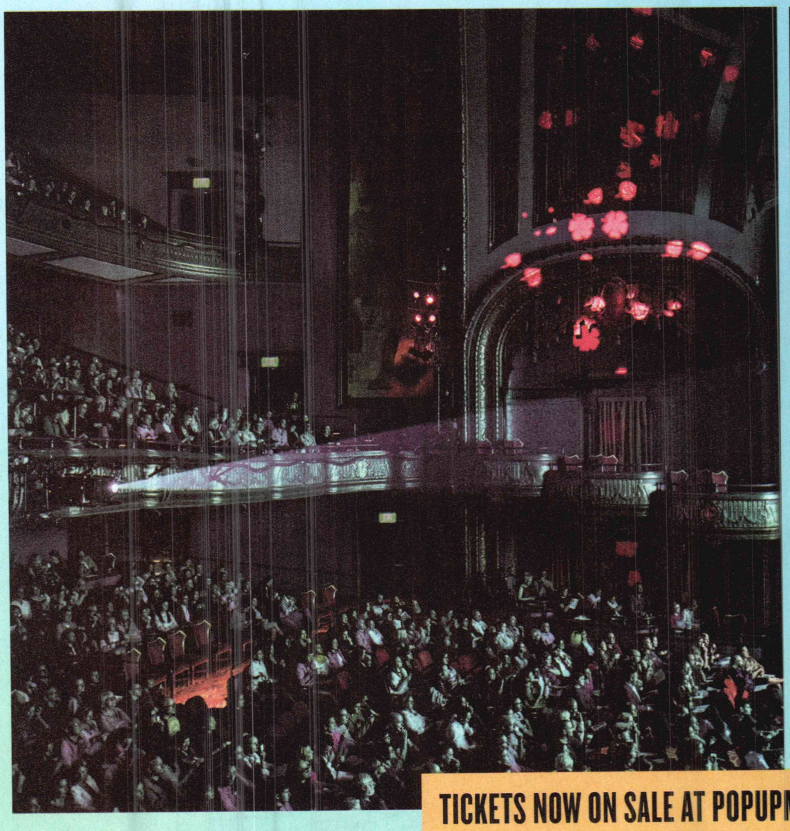
*Illustration by Jack Sjogren*

"BEAUTIFUL."
LOS ANGELES TIMES

"A SENSATION."
THE NEW YORK TIMES



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LOS ANGELES JAN 30
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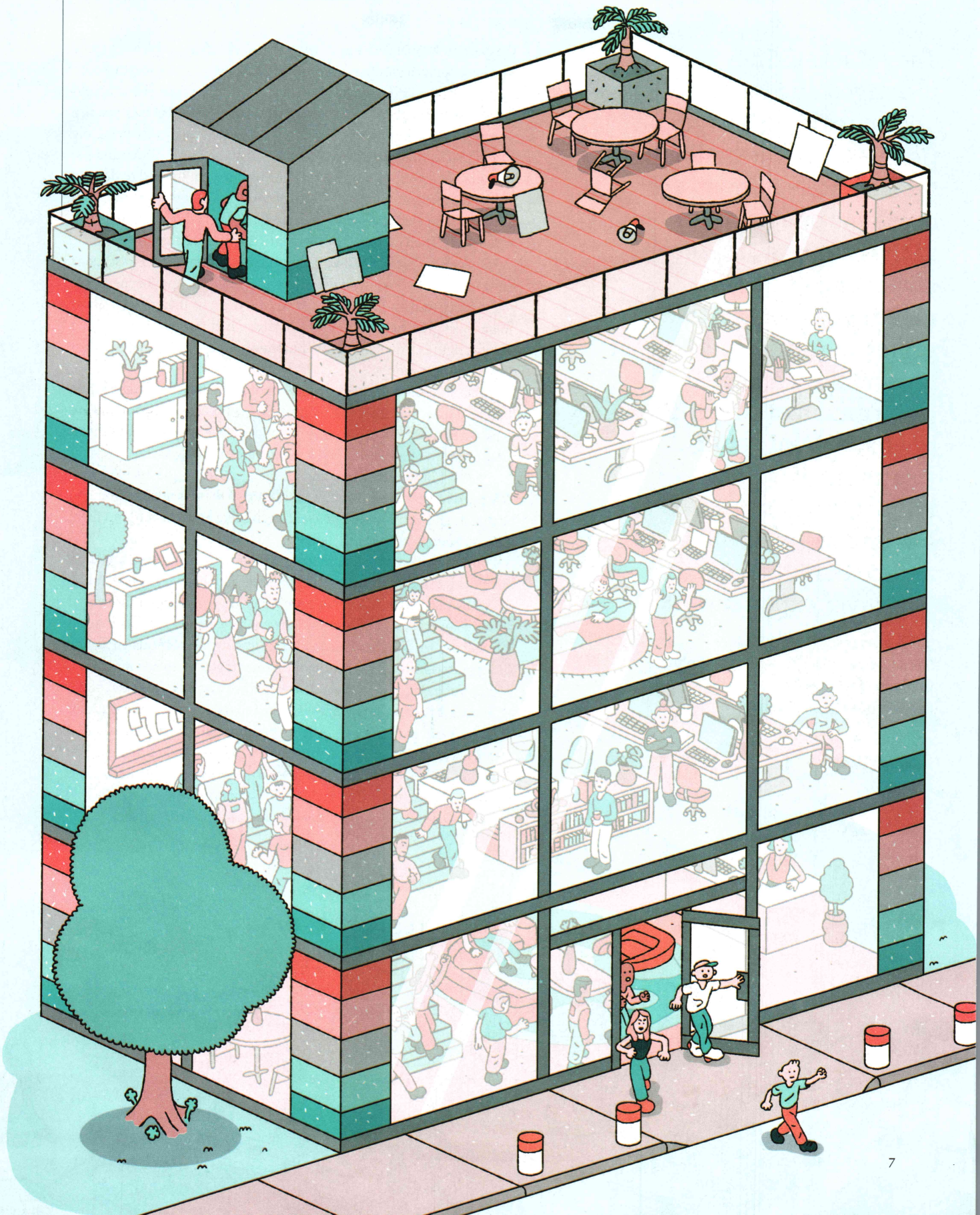
A sometimes pointed, sometimes resigned conversation with engineers, designers, research scientists, and job candidates who are pushing for a more ethical Silicon Valley

# The Tech Revolt



They Slacked. They messaged on Signal. They circulated pledges on Google Docs. They talked on the phone. They spoke quietly to one another in the cafeteria and spoke up at company-wide meetings. Whether it was protesting projects with ICE and the Chinese government or walking out to demand better treatment of women, political activism has entered tech with a force that the industry has never experienced.

Interviews by Cameron Bird, Sean Captain, Elise Craig, Haley Cohen Gilliland, and Joy Shan
Illustrations by Tim Peacock

## The Slack engineer who got thousands of tech workers to pledge not to build tools that target Muslims and immigrants

The election happens. The next day at the Slack office, people were quite literally sobbing in the cafeteria. I was mostly keeping my s--- together until my parents called from Canada. I went into one of the little phone booths and just sobbed on the phone. It took a bit of time to grieve, but then you also have to act. The space that Maciej[1] created in Tech Solidarity was incredibly important. To show up at that first meeting at the Stripe offices and see hundreds of other people who are figuring out what the hell to do next was incredibly gratifying. "Oh, Joe who works over at the security team at a text-editor company actually cares about the fate of Muslim people in America." There were lots of pleasant surprises like that.

I think one of the things that Tech Solidarity got really right was: "Don't show up at these organizations offering to make an app for them that you're going to abandon. Show up and help them fix their printer. Show up and just give them money. You're a bunch of tech workers making six-plus figures. You made a lot of money on the IPO or whatever. Just give them your money."

It was after the first meeting that I thought about the pledge. While I'm the one who started the Google Doc, a lot of other people were involved in those early conversations about what does it actually mean to take a stand. What ended up becoming the catalyst was the December 14 meeting[2] between Trump and all the tech CEOs. The attitude was: "We need to get this done before this date so that it's not just going to be that he shows up, and there's fanfare. It's like he shows up, and there are 3,000 people who said, 'Hell no.'"

I put the pledge[3] together in less than a month. I wrote the first draft but quickly pulled in other people. Once we had that deadline, building the website came easily. Imagine a bunch of programmers scattered around San Francisco and around the country working together to get this piece of writing out. Everybody was texting their friends on Signal, sliding into Twitter DMs, getting the names together, so it wouldn't just be a few of us standing alone. We were blown away by the speed of it.

There's this idea that, "Oh, well, if so-and-so doesn't do the work for ICE or whatever then some other contractor will step up and do it." I mean, maybe, but that doesn't mean you should be the one doing it. You might as well be the squeaky wheel, be the wrench in the machinery. We were just really excited to meet so many other wrenches.

— LEIGH HONEYWELL, FORMER SECURITY ENGINEER AT SLACK, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF TALL POPPY

# The developer who tried, and failed, to get Microsoft to cut ties with ICE

I've been contributing to open-source projects[4] for more than a decade. Open-source software was developed because large corporations like Microsoft were charging ungodly sums for software and making it inaccessible for people who needed basic tools to function in the world. The primary value of open source is the notion of sharing. Closing our borders is about our desire to not share our wealth as a nation with those in need.

Last June 4, Microsoft announced it was acquiring GitHub[5]. Microsoft has major contracts with ICE and other Homeland Security divisions that are engaged in what I consider civil- and human-rights abuses.

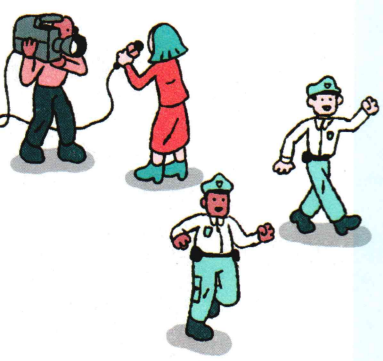
There isn't a single tech company with a platform that doesn't have a military client somewhere, so I'm not going to target, say, GitLab[6] because the Department of Defense bought a license to use their software. But I will target Microsoft for actively working with ICE to develop technologies to target immigrants and minorities and refugees. My parents are the children of Holocaust survivors. My father was born in a displaced-persons camp in Germany in 1947. My mother was born in America to two people who snuck in on tourist visas and overstayed and got citizenship that way. I am the child of a refugee.

I whipped a petition together and made the initial commit[7] on June 19, my 39th birthday: Tell Microsoft to drop ICE as a client or lose us as GitHub users. I petitioned some open-source maintainers[8] of major projects who were vocal on Twitter about immigration and refugee issues and asked them to sign, and several of them did, like Rick Waldron, who's a big deal in the JavaScript world. Others said no for professional reasons.

It was the slowest-moving petition I've ever made on the internet. GitHub is so ubiquitous, and saying you're not going to use it is like saying you're not going to breathe air. The way websites are built today, everything has become dependent on these open-source packages developed and maintained by one person. If those people moved their code, it'd break something.[9]

In a month and a half, we got 300 signers but never got any response from Microsoft. I canceled my paid account, then removed my open-source software from GitHub and moved to Bitbucket.[10] The merger between GitHub and Microsoft went through in October. I don't know what kind of impact the petition has had. Was it all for show?

— DANIEL SIERADSKI, OPEN-SOURCE DEVELOPER



1 *Developer Maciej Cegłowski, a longtime critic of Silicon Valley, created Tech Solidarity immediately after the 2016 election, holding its first meeting on November 28. The organization's goal is "to better connect tech workers with the communities they live in, and to share the prosperity the tech industry has experienced more broadly with our country."*

2 *Alphabet CEO Larry Page, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, Apple CEO Tim Cook, Tesla founder Elon Musk, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, and PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel were among those who attended. Thiel was the only one who had endorsed Trump during the campaign.*

3 *It reads in part: "We refuse to build a database of people based on their Constitutionally protected religious beliefs."*

4 *Open-source software allows anyone to inspect, alter, and enhance its code for any purpose.*

5 *GitHub is the largest online community of open-source coders — the default tool developers use to store their projects and network with other people.*

6 *A rival of GitHub, GitLab is also used by developers to store code for projects they're working on.*

7 *A "commit" is a change to a file. It records what changes were made, when, and by whom.*

8 *In open source, a "maintainer" is the person who builds the source code, fixes bugs, and generally keeps the code up to date.*

9 *Much of the internet, including services like Facebook, is built on open-source software. In 2016, an open-source developer named Azer Koçulu deleted 11 lines of JavaScript after a professional dispute. Programmers from around the world found that their projects had suddenly stopped working.*

10 *A popular alternative to GitHub*

## The software engineer who refuses to work at Amazon, even though it tried to hire her

As a software engineer and especially as a woman, I get a ton of recruiting emails. There's almost no emphasis on, "What is the impact of this company?" Instead they talk about, "We just got funding. Look at this cool tech stack you'll be working with." At Stanford, there was only one ethics class that was a requirement for all computer science majors. There was this sense of, "Oh, if you're going into tech, it's not evil like investment banking. It's a more ethically safe route."

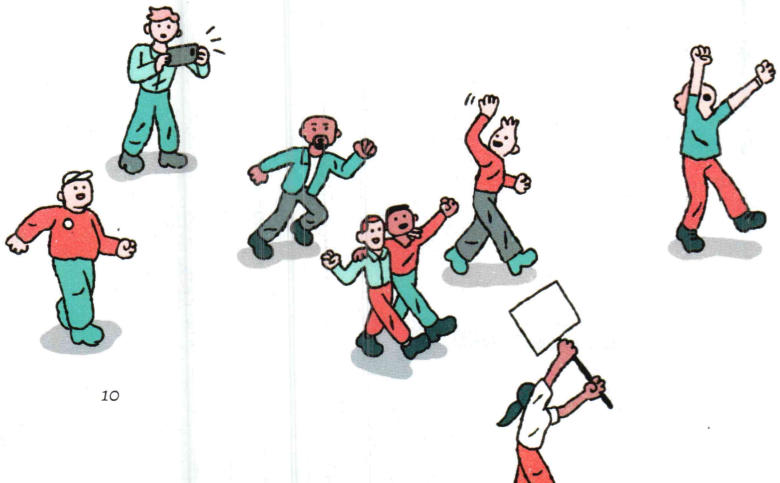
Last August, this Amazon Web Services recruiter emails me. I had recently found out that Palantir[1], which works directly with ICE, was running on Amazon Web Services, and I was talking about it with a friend who was working with a Latinx political organization called Mijente. They had just initiated a campaign to try to cut ICE from the tech that supports it. In my email to the recruiter — it was a spur-of-the-moment thing — I wanted someone to understand that I'm paying attention to what their company is doing, that I'm not just going to sign on because of the cool tech I might get to work with. Palantir doesn't have a gigantic contract with Amazon Web Services, and it wouldn't be financially difficult for Amazon to cancel its contract.

Three weeks later, I get an email from the manager at Amazon that said, "My recruiting partner reached out to you and brought your profile to my attention." I think my email got pulled up in some filter that says, "Good candidate. Respond to recruiter: yes or no. If they responded, then forward to the manager." This manager had not seen the email I had written. We spoke on the phone, and it was clear that he thought he was going to be talking to me about working at Amazon. I pretty quickly hijacked the conversation and said, "Did you read the email?" He's like, "No." I said, "OK, instead of you trying to sell me, I'm going to tell you why I wouldn't work for Amazon[2], and can you tell it to your boss?" He seemed caught off guard and was probably being polite until he could get off the phone.

— ANNA GEIDUSCHEK, SOFTWARE ENGINEER AT DROPBOX

1 *Palantir Technologies is a data-mining firm founded by Peter Thiel and Alex Karp. Since 2011, ICE has paid the company tens of millions of dollars to build and operate information-gathering systems that track undocumented immigrants.*

2 *In June 2018, 450 Amazon employees wrote a letter to Jeff Bezos demanding that the company stop selling its facial-recognition software, Rekognition, to law enforcement and to cancel its contract with Palantir. Bezos refused.*

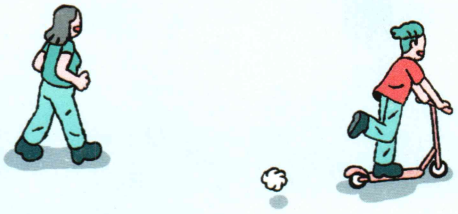


## The senior engineer who quit Google in protest of its relationship with China

I found out about Project Dragonfly on August 1, 2018, when ***The Intercept* report**[3] came out, as did most engineers. Pretty much immediately afterwards, two engineers, who had already transferred off the project because of human-rights disagreements, posted internally that they could finally talk about it. One ended up quitting. That was when my alarm went off. Over the next few days, I asked everyone if they knew more, if there was some explanation for the project. Everyone said to just wait for the next company-wide meeting.

Either once a week or once every two weeks on a Thursday, there's a meeting, called TGIF, with Larry Page and Sergey Brin and Sundar Pichai. People go up to the microphone and ask them questions. There's a culture that if there's something contentious, management should respond to it. But it's also a great way to delay people. The next meeting didn't happen, so it was two weeks after the news broke that we had the next TGIF.

By that point, I had already submitted a conditional resignation letter to my manager. Engineers were discovering more and more disturbing details about Dragonfly. We found code that was explicitly preventing air-quality data from being reported if it didn't come from Beijing. I was able to find a list



associated with the project and look through thousands of blacklisted terms — anything related to Xi Jinping, the Nobel Prize, or critical of the Chinese government.

After Dragonfly was public, there was an engineer who realized that he had been misled about a piece of code he had approved. He had been told that the code did not affect user data. If it was a critical component for the surveillance of a billion people, to imply no impact on user data is maybe an understatement. He was very angry and **filed a bug report**[4] that anyone could see. Senior people tried to shut down that discussion.

All these things happened in the two weeks up to the TGIF. That meeting is famous because **it got live-tweeted by a *New York Times* journalist**[5]. Just a few words were said about Dragonfly — nothing substantial — by Sergey. The fact that it was live-tweeted was used by management to shut down discussion. One of the engineers got up to push back against Dragonfly, but once he heard that the meeting was being live-tweeted, he changed his discussion to yelling, "F--- you" to the leaker and got quite a bit of applause.

❸

*Project Dragonfly wasn't public knowledge until* The Intercept *published its exposé, titled "Google Plans to Launch Censored Search Engine in China, Documents Reveal."*

❹

*When an employee uncovers a tech issue in a Google product, he files an internal report that's accessible to his colleagues.*

❺

New York Times *reporter Kate Conger attended the* TGIF *meeting and tweeted Sergey Brin's responses to questions about Dragonfly. Sample tweet: "Sergey: 'Googlers should feel broadly proud of their work, not feel that it compromises their principles. There's the question of the degree of attenuation.'"*

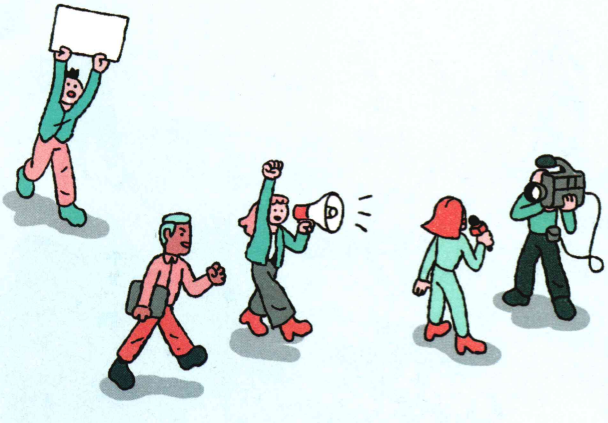
❻

*Among the groups that signed the letter were: Amnesty International, Committee to Protect Journalists, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Human Rights Watch, and* PEN *International.*

It became really hard to talk to management after that. That was Thursday, August 16. The next Monday, I submitted my two-week notice to my manager but also made the letter available to the entire company. I made my case about why Dragonfly is an internal compromise of Google's values. I also tried to address the predominant pushback internally at Google: Mainland Chinese employees were essentially arguing that if you were not from China, you had no standing to discuss this issue. Management even told me, "You should listen to your Chinese colleagues."

After my letter was released, I got to have meetings with even more senior management. Those meetings were dominated by concerns about leaking — that was more important, it seems, than the ethics or human-rights concerns. Those meetings escalated all the way up to the head of AI research, Jeff Dean. The day before I resigned, I finally got a meeting with him — with my manager's manager listening in, so that he would know how to respond to others who raised similar concerns.

I was really looking forward to that meeting. I assumed I would get a sympathetic response. Two days before, **14 human-rights organizations**[6] had written to



Google calling them to withdraw from the project. To me, that letter gave weight to my letter, which pointed to Google's promise not to design or deploy tech whose "purpose contravenes widely accepted principles of international law and human rights."

I showed up with a huge list of questions that management chose not to answer at TGIF. The best response I could get was that there would be only a small amount of things that would be censored. Jeff Dean's primary argument for why it was OK for us to censor in China was that we can't know how bad censorship is in the U.S. already because of **FISA warrants**[1] — that it could be just as bad as China. Unless I thought that Google should withdraw from the U.S., then what ground did I have to complain about the China situation? The day after the meeting, I handed over my laptop and my badge and that was it.

— JACK POULSON, FORMER SENIOR RESEARCH SCIENTIST AT GOOGLE

1 *A warrant issued by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, known as the FISA Court, to surveil a U.S. citizen or permanent resident who's suspected of being a foreign intelligence agent. The court meets in secret.*

## The Microsoft engineer who wants to organize coders as well as cafeteria workers

I wasn't involved in the initial organizing of the **ICE petition at Microsoft**[2], a lot of which happened at headquarters. But in the Boston office, a bunch of us got together and circulated the petition and joined a protest one weekend. I work with **a lot of people who aren't from the U.S.**[3] and are likely on H-1B visas and did not feel comfortable putting their names on the document. I've been careful about not having conversations on any Microsoft platforms. I wouldn't chat with co-workers over Skype or Outlook. We talk on the phone or WhatsApp or IRL. I don't want to put anyone at risk.

A lot of people I sent the document to didn't even respond. I think they just didn't want to engage. The culture at Microsoft is different than that of Facebook. The average Microsoft engineer tends to be older, and there is a generational thing where they believe in the meritocracy of working in tech and trying to be as apolitical as possible. Because it's an older crowd, people go home and see their children, which translates to valuing stability at work and work-life balance. Microsoft is also very strong on charity — perhaps this is how the company gives employees an ethical out.

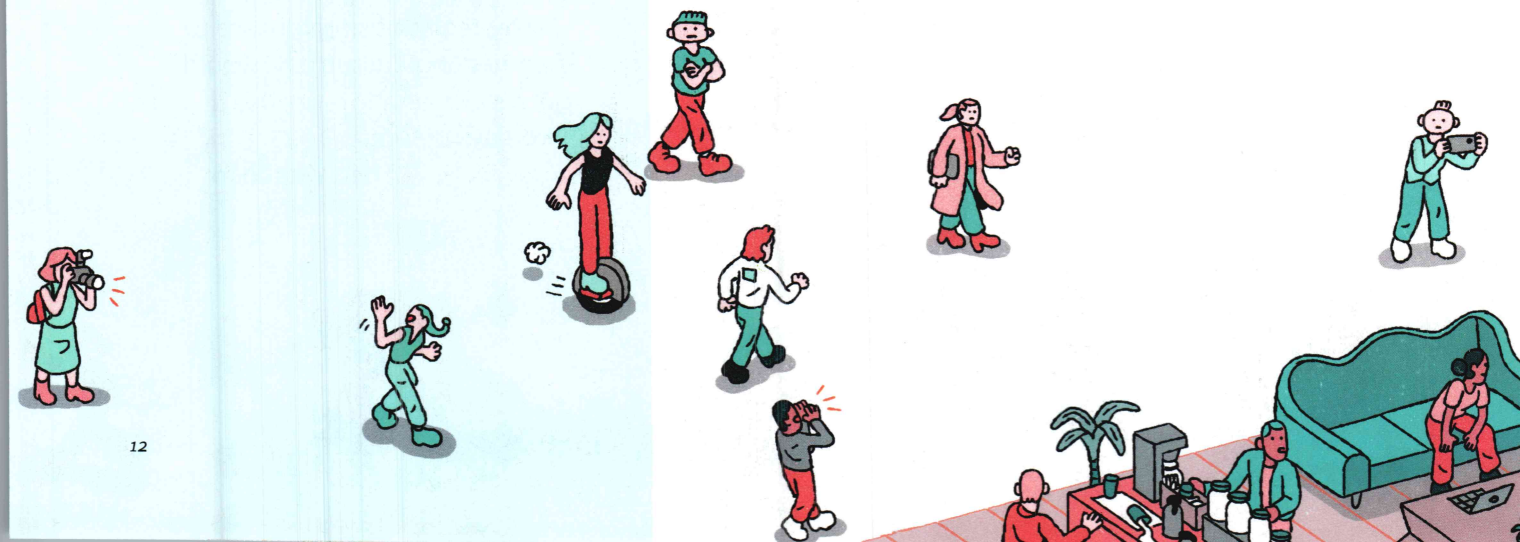
One thing we did in the **Tech Workers Coalition**[4] was get tech workers thinking about their role in the company, especially in a big company. Part of our strategy is to build solidarity with folks like cafeteria workers and, in the case of Amazon, warehouse workers. We helped cafeteria workers at Facebook unionize. Because of the tech workers' high salaries, the conversation of the past couple years has been, "Oh, are tech workers workers?" Now people are accepting the fact that they are.

— ANONYMOUS, ENGINEER AT MICROSOFT AND VOLUNTEER IN THE TECH WORKERS COALITION

2 *In January 2018, Microsoft announced it was providing cloud services to ICE. Last summer, 300 employees signed a petition to the CEO demanding that Microsoft terminate its relationship — which remains.*

3 *Microsoft was awarded 1,479 new H-1B visas in the 2017 fiscal year. The visas allow foreigners with specialized skills to work temporarily in the United States.*

4 *A collective of tech employees and organizers whose purpose is to promote social justice and workers' rights, the Tech Workers Coalition started in 2015. It has helped in the efforts to unionize cafeteria servers, janitors, and drivers at Facebook, Google, Oracle, and Cisco.*



## The engineer who was fired for trying to unionize

From my perspective, the whole thing went from zero to 60 overnight. One morning a year ago, I came in and found out the person I reported to was no longer at the company. I went to my manager and I was like, "What's happening? This person was well-liked, well-respected, recently promoted to a team lead, had a great record with Lanetix[5] as far as anybody was aware. This is making everybody, including me, a bit scared for our jobs. Is there some kind of financial problem? Are there layoffs coming?" And he said, "Let me try to find out."

When the manager finally got the office together, he told us, "I was given a list of things to say: 'Don't be divisive. Don't be subversive.'" But nobody was being divisive or subversive.

Later, I was called in for a one-on-one and was told, "Hey, I've heard that there's this external Slack group[6] that people are in on, and if you're on it, you should leave." He said something to the effect of, "Anybody that's in that Slack group is on management's s--- list." I was like, "First of all, I don't know of it. But second, what are you even talking about? I'll be a part of whatever Slack group I want."

After a week or so, somebody threw out the idea of bringing up what's bothering us to management. So we just gave them a letter saying, "Look, we like the environment that we work in, or at least we did. We all value our working relationship with you, and we would like to air our concerns and come to some kind of agreement about how to move forward on the right foot."

We had two specific requests. One was, recognize our right to organize as we see fit. What we were saying was, If we want to be on a Slack group, we will be. If we want to talk amongst ourselves, we will. They were preventing us from talking about workplace conditions, and that was unacceptable. And the second request was, please do right by the person who was fired.

The CEO set up a meeting with all of us, where he gave some incredibly condescending and offensive analogies to parenting. He didn't have a good read on the situation at all. If you strip all the BS aside,

5 *Launched in 2013, Lanetix makes customer-relationship-management software for the transportation and logistics industries.*

6 *Some employees had set up an online discussion group, separate from the Lanetix network, to talk about concerns with management and working conditions.*

his actual message was, "I need to consult an attorney in order to say whether I have to recognize your right to organize, so I will schedule a follow-up once I do so." We were honestly shocked. This is like table stakes for a civil conversation, you know?

We had the follow-up conversation, and he did recognize our right to organize at that point. But shortly thereafter, he uninvited all of us from the company retreat, and in the same email, let us know that the company was going to open up a development center in Eastern Europe, sending the clear message of, Get in line or we're outsourcing your work.

At that point, we all kind of said, "You know what? We can play hardball, too." That was when the consensus was built to do some collective action. Unionizing is a risky thing, especially for those with families or those with dire financial situations. People were definitely concerned. We were putting our jobs on the line. We got the majority we needed to unionize and gave them notice. Ten days later, we were all fired.

— SAHIL TALWAR, FORMER ENGINEER AT LANETIX, NOW AT ORACLE

## The designer who left Facebook because he felt its growth-at-all-costs strategy was wrong

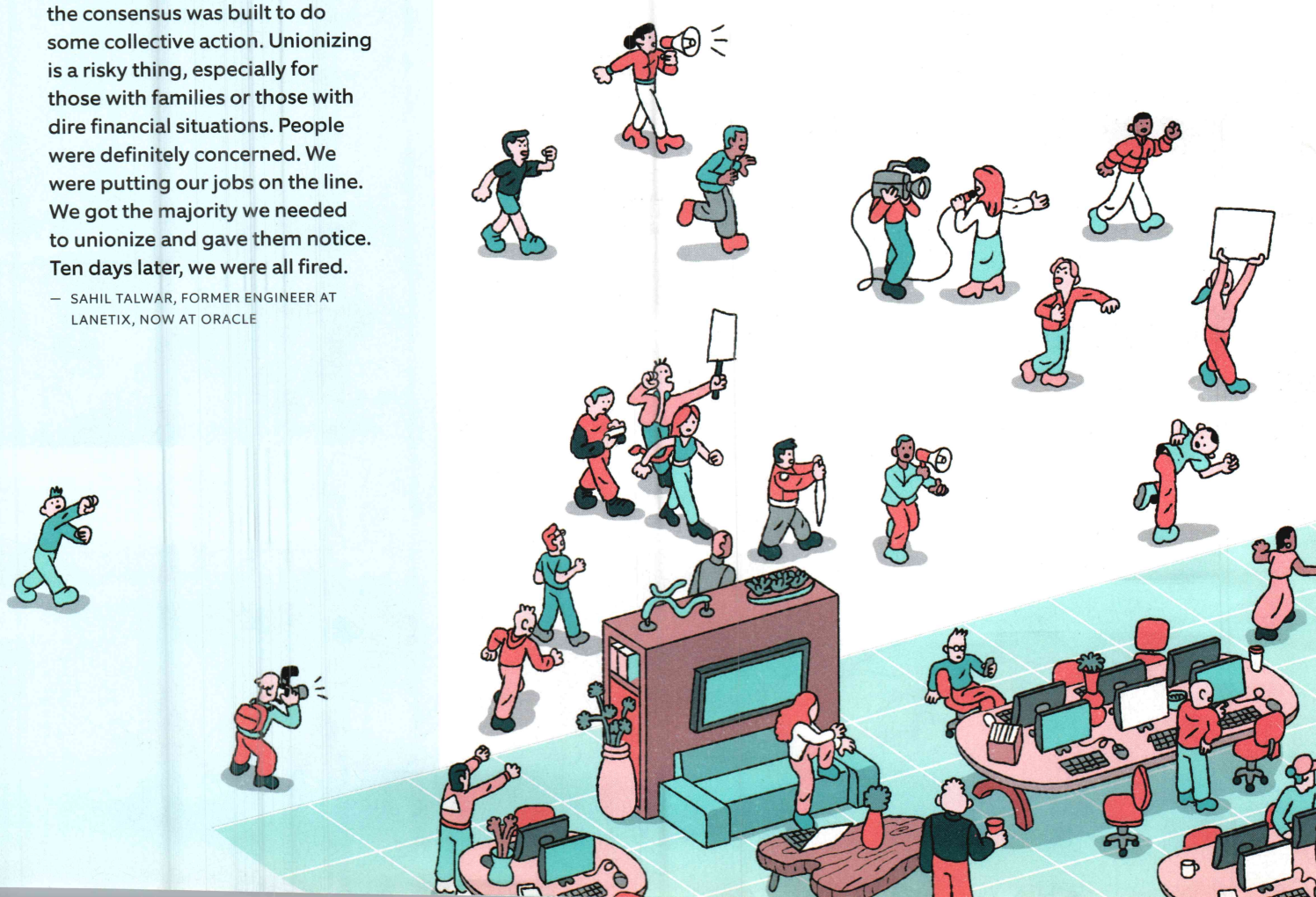
A lot of interesting people in the product-design world were working at Facebook. I thought that if these people are working there, then the company must have a base-level respect for people.

During my first internship at Facebook, one of the developers discovered a bit of code that was specific to censoring content. We eventually realized that this was for their China effort. There was a big discussion at the company, and it was brought up during Zuck's weekly Q and A. That was the first time that I thought, *Oh, maybe this company says they care about openness, but they're willing to bow down to this government's requirements of censorship.*

When I started working full time, I began to notice other instances. Take

1

*In 2016, Andrew Bosworth, a VP at Facebook, circulated a memo titled "The Ugly" that defended the company's growth strategy. "The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is de facto good." The memo was leaked in 2018, two weeks after the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke.*

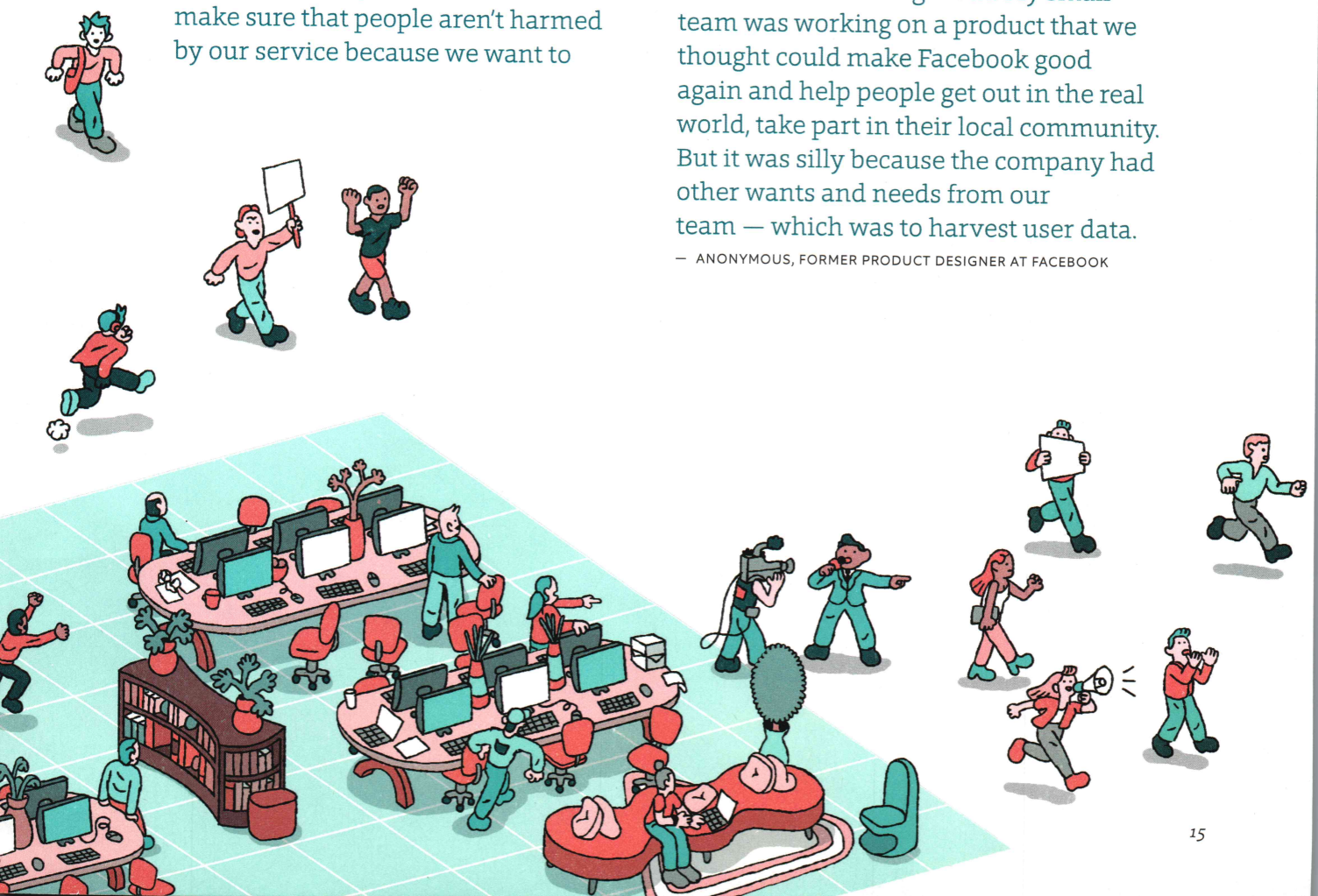


Messenger, for example. Employees made a lot of complaints about how the Messenger app was devolving into this ad experience — how we're adding notifications for no reason at all except to drive people to open the app, remind them to use Messenger again. Were these updates really making the product better for people or, instead, making our users more profitable for the business? The product managers always had a way of explaining it away.

**The Boz memo**[1] was indicative of how executives really thought about Facebook. It basically said, "Bad things will happen on our platform. People will get bullied, people will get hurt, but it's OK because we have this larger goal." To me, that's just not right. We should make sure that people aren't harmed by our service because we want to grow and expand. This growth-at-all-costs manifesto pervaded everything in the company. There was a product where we would help businesses scan latent Bluetooth signals so that if a consumer came in, the business owner would pick up their signals on their own phones, and we would know where they were. We were asking business owners to help us track their customers without being upfront about our tactics to either them or our users.

I felt powerless inside the company. It was a façade, this idea that we could really influence the company through open discussion. I quit. I didn't want to be complicit in what the executive team wanted to accomplish. It felt like I had to fall in line or get out. My small team was working on a product that we thought could make Facebook good again and help people get out in the real world, take part in their local community. But it was silly because the company had other wants and needs from our team — which was to harvest user data.

— ANONYMOUS, FORMER PRODUCT DESIGNER AT FACEBOOK



## The developer who tried to prevent companies that work with ICE from using his software

Lerna[1] is an open-source project that was started by a friend. I began working on it in early 2016. I've worked on several open-source projects that have been downloaded millions of times, and it becomes a reality that some people use them for horrible things. But when I found out that Palantir was using Lerna, that was different — Palantir works with ICE.

When I saw what ICE was doing over the summer, I was so angry I was shaking for hours. There was a video of a 3-year-old who didn't recognize his mother anymore, as if she abandoned him. He didn't understand that he was taken. My mom ran a day-care center out of our home for the first 12 years of my life, and it was obvious that the government was inflicting trauma on these kids. Even if in the smallest of ways, it was partly my fault for not doing more about it.

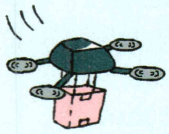
I opened up a pull request[2] and said, "I don't want Palantir to use my project." In the past, I had talked about including a morality clause, so I brought up the idea with the friend I had started Lerna with and with the current maintainer, and they were for it. We didn't have any law background so had no idea what we were doing, but we thought we could try and blacklist companies from using it. I had done some Googling on who works with ICE and turns out it's half of Silicon Valley. I made a list[3] of these companies and said, "This license[4] doesn't apply to you."

People got angry instantly on GitHub, Twitter, Reddit, Hacker News. When I brought ethics into open source, it was like the first time people had encountered it. They said, "What do you mean you hold us personally responsible?" The immediate response from employees at Microsoft and LinkedIn was, "This license isn't legally valid." People at Palantir didn't reach out at all.

One of the features of open source is that it's unconditional: It's free for anyone to use, and it can't be taken away. Because of that, the guy who termed the phrase "open source" wrote that Lerna wasn't open source anymore.[5] The person maintaining Lerna went silent, and one afternoon, I got an email saying I was removed from the project. Then another pull request reverted the change I made, saying I'd been removed for code-of-conduct violations.

I was told about the internal effort by employees to get Microsoft to rip up their ICE contract. A lot of folks there thought people outside Microsoft didn't care that the company was working with ICE — that it was just liberal snowflakes pushing internally. But when the Lerna thing happened, the first thing I was told was that it was a big external signal that other people did.

— JAMIE KYLE, OPEN-SOURCE DEVELOPER



1 *Lerna is a widely used open-source software that helps companies and organizations manage large amounts of code.*

2 *How coders in GitHub suggest changes, make note of bugs, and keep track of tasks*

3 *Among others, the list included Microsoft, Deloitte, Canon, and LinkedIn.*

4 *Lerna used the MIT license, the most common license in the open-source world, which allows developers to use the code in any project they want.*

5 *Eric Raymond, one of the philosophical leaders of the open-source movement, condemned the Lerna project's choice as "destructive of one of the deep norms that keeps the open-source community functional – keeping politics separated from our work. If we do not maintain that norm, we risk fractionating into a collection of squabbling tribes arguing particularisms and unable to sustain really large-scale cooperation."*

## The AI researcher who helped organize two of the biggest protests inside Google

I had known about **Maven**[6] before word broke internally and was following efforts by a number of senior engineers to push back against the project. I had seen none of these efforts work. At the same time, I had been speaking and writing about the stakes of these technologies. Using machine-learning technology for a drone program that has been deemed illegal by **human-rights organizations**[7] is not something we can do blindly. Forming an alliance between Google, a company that is entrusted with collecting sensitive personal information about millions and millions of people, and the world's most powerful military is not something we should go into lightly. I was as vocal as possible, and there were people who enjoyed the show. But I wasn't seeing any change.

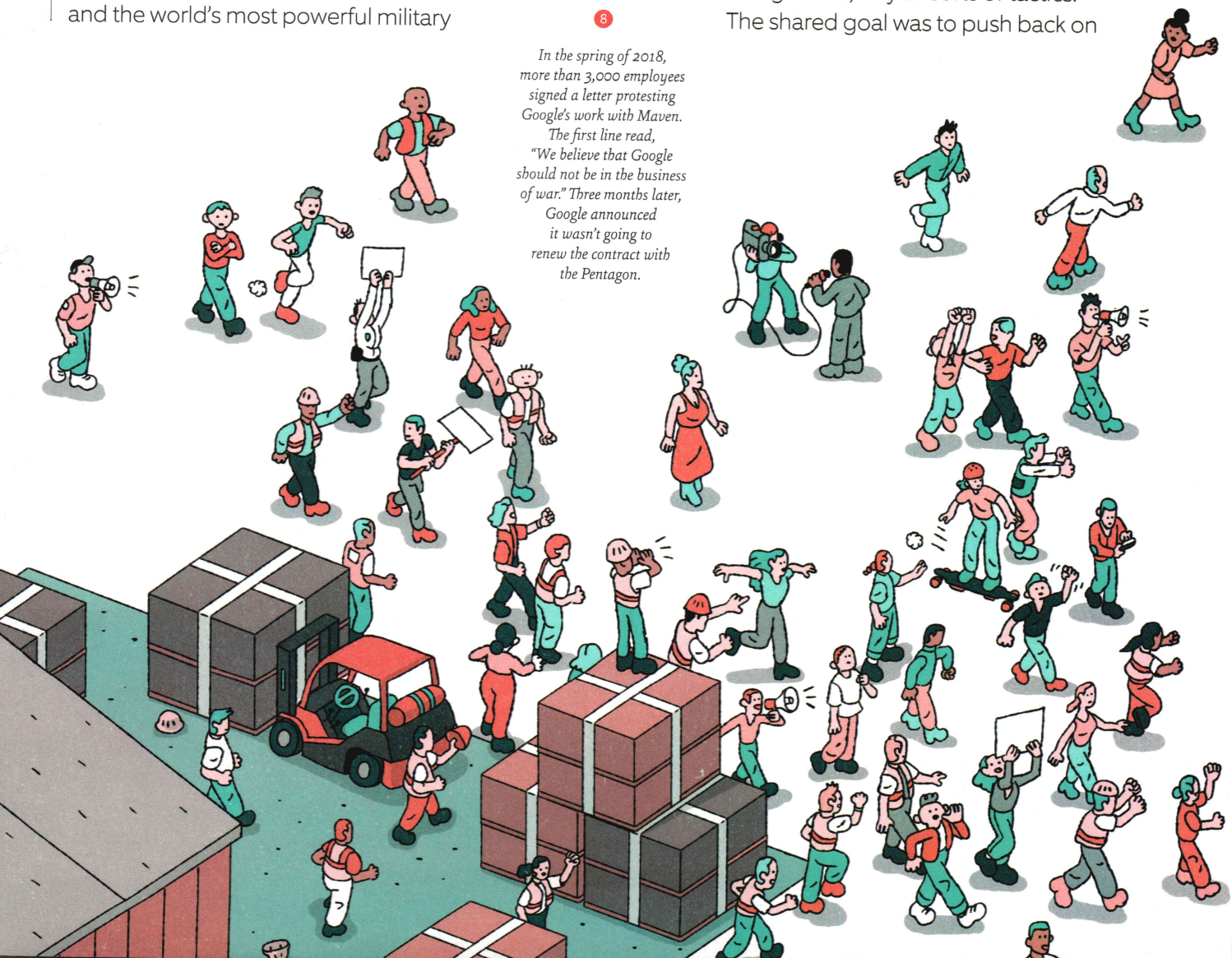
I wrote the **Maven letter**[8], and people across Google made suggestions. I put my name on it and sent it out. It was one piece of a much bigger effort. There were hundreds of people who did weekly coordinated leafleting and organized questions for the TGIF meetings. Some people quit over Maven.

It was an organic movement. There were people who would start doing things and ask other people to come along. It was, "Try all sorts of tactics." The shared goal was to push back on

6 *Project Maven is a Department of Defense project to employ artificial intelligence in drone warfare. Google's involvement became public in 2018.*

7 *At the moment, there is no international ban on fully autonomous weapons, though several countries, including Austria and Brazil, have called for one.*

8 *In the spring of 2018, more than 3,000 employees signed a letter protesting Google's work with Maven. The first line read, "We believe that Google should not be in the business of war." Three months later, Google announced it wasn't going to renew the contract with the Pentagon.*



this contract and on decision-makers who had moved ahead with this relationship without fully considering the moral and ethical consequences.

It was great that there was a commitment to cancel Maven, but I think there are bigger core issues at Google and in tech overall. You have companies that have significant centralized power, where a handful of people are making decisions that affect the whole world in profound ways without even being accountable to their workforce, let alone the public. We have not solved that issue. It's what unites all the recent movements: It's an unaccountable few making decisions that are a cost for others.

One of the things that led to **the walkout**[1] was a *New York Times* article, which documented things that were known among whisper networks and had the details about the **Andy Rubin payout**[2]. There was no understanding from leadership what a significant problem the article documented.

1 *On November 1, 2018, more than 20,000 Google employees walked out to protest the company's treatment of women.*

2 *On October 25, 2018,* The New York Times *broke the story that Google had given a $90 million payout to Andy Rubin, the creator of Android mobile software, after he was accused of forcing a co-worker to perform oral sex.*

3 *Among the demands were: "an end to Forced Arbitration in cases of harassment and discrimination... a clear, uniform, globally inclusive process for reporting sexual misconduct safely and anonymously."*

The walkout came together really quickly. It started with an email on the moms' mailing list. I'm not on the moms' list, but I got a text Sunday evening that people are thinking of having a walkout. It was organized within three to four days. I was part of the core organizers. People worked around the clock. **The demands**[3] were crowdsourced from hundreds of people, and I helped structure them and write messaging. At the beginning, I didn't expect 20,000 people to walk out. I was hoping for a few hundred and a little press. What it became was incredible. 99

— MEREDITH WHITTAKER, FOUNDER AND LEAD OF GOOGLE'S OPEN RESEARCH GROUP AND CO-FOUNDER OF THE AI NOW INSTITUTE AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

# THE DEPORTED AMERICANS

*More than 600,000 U.S.-born children of undocumented parents live in Mexico. What happens when you return to a country you've never known?*

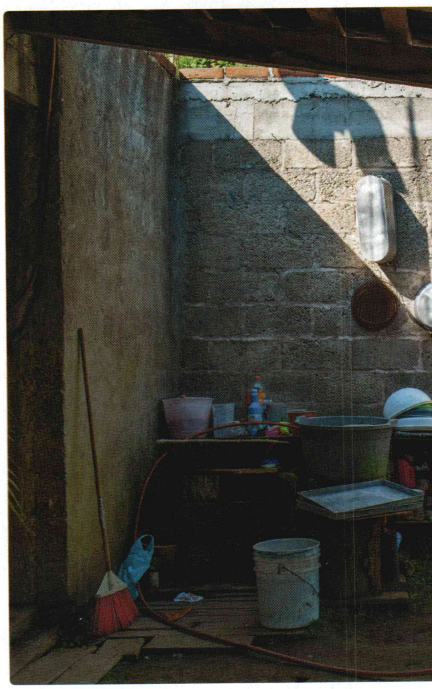
*By Brooke Jarvis*
*Photographs by Livia Corona Benjamin*

PREVIOUS PAGES
*Lesly and Ashley Mantilla in front of their grandparents' home*

**THE SCHOOL DAY AT ESCUELA SECUNDARIA TÉCNICA NÚMERO 26 STARTS EARLY. AS THE FIRST RAYS OF SUNSHINE MAKE THEIR WAY OVER THE FOOTHILLS OF POPOCATÉPETL VOLCANO IN CENTRAL MEXICO, THE NARROW STREETS FILL WITH STUDENTS IN ONES AND TWOS AND LITTLE LAUGHING GROUPS.**

Ashley Mantilla's day starts earlier than most. On a Monday last June, long before the sun rose, the 15-year-old left the small cinder-block house she shares with her sister, brother, and parents. She walked past the lime tree under which the family entertains guests, past the outhouse and the thin horse tied up next to her grandparents' home, to the road that winds by a deep ravine, and into the center of her small town, perched high in the ridges below the volcano. There, she waited for a minibus that would drive her half an hour to Número 26. It's not a cheap trip to make every day, and her parents are willing to pay for it not because they have extra money but because they think it's a better option than the local school. There are real teachers there instead of video lessons, and specialty classes include coding in addition to agriculture, food preservation, and beekeeping.

By 7:30, the school's courtyard was packed with teenagers. They lined up in straight rows and placed their hands across their chests as the Mexican national anthem played on a loudspeaker. Ashley had PE that day, so she had her dark hair pulled back and was wearing her gym uniform: track pants and a polo shirt embroidered with the words *NIÑOS HÉROES*, or heroic children, a group of historical figures that the school honors as a kind of mascot. The heroes were six military cadets, the youngest of them 13, who died defending a castle in Mexico City from American invaders in 1847.



ABOVE
*The home where the Mantilla family now lives*

LEFT
*Their kitchen*

It was, in other words, a long way from the school days Ashley used to experience, back when she was an American student growing up in an American town and studying in an American public school. In those days, her father, Felix, worked as a cook in a restaurant and did maintenance on swimming pools. Her older sister, Lesly, earned a much-treasured certificate of academic excellence with President Barack Obama's signature on it. They studied the history of South Carolina, their home state; they ate turkey on Thanksgiving and built snowmen in the winter. Sometimes classmates bullied Ashley, telling her to go back to Mexico, but their taunts mostly confused her. "I don't *know* Mexico," she would say. "I'm from here." She knew, of course, that her parents were from Mexico and that they sometimes talked about a plan to go back, but she didn't like to think about that. "My mom always said, 'Come here, I'm going to teach you Spanish.' And I said, 'No, I'm not going to need it.'"

In 2011, South Carolina's then-governor, Nikki Haley, signed what was known as a "show me your papers" law, modeled on Arizona's infamous SB 1070, which allowed police to turn

*Lesly on the roof of her family's home*

routine traffic stops into immigration checkpoints. The state also made it harder for undocumented immigrants to get jobs or driver's licenses. The new laws were part of an effort to make immigrants' lives more difficult, pushing them toward what some politicians at the time were calling self-deportation.

Ashley's parents began to feel anxious. Basic parts of their daily lives — driving, working, shopping — suddenly seemed risky. They thought of what had happened a few years before, when a South Carolina poultry plant was raided and many of its workers deported without their children. "What happens if they separate us?" wondered Berenice, Ashley's mother. "We were thinking of the good of the family." They decided it was time to move their three children — Lesly, 12; Ashley, 9; and Angel, 5, all American-born citizens — from the only home that they knew. In the jargon of immigration, the family was planning to "return migrate." But the kids could hardly return to a place where they had never been. They were just ... leaving.

**THE BUSES PASSED ADOBE-BRICK BUILDINGS WITH TIN ROOFS AND DONKEYS CARRYING LOADS OF WOOD. *OH MY GOSH,* ASHLEY THOUGHT, *ARE WE GOING TO LIVE HERE?***

The flight from Charlotte, North Carolina, landed in Mexico City two months after the new immigration law went into effect. The family took a series of buses away from the city, toward the tiny community where the children's parents and grandparents had all grown up. The stores and highways dropped away as they climbed higher, along steep hillsides draped with dozens of thin black pipes, the local farmers' ingenious but jury-rigged solution for irrigation. The buses passed adobe-brick buildings

with tin roofs and donkeys carrying loads of wood. *Oh my gosh*, Ashley thought, *are we going to live here?*

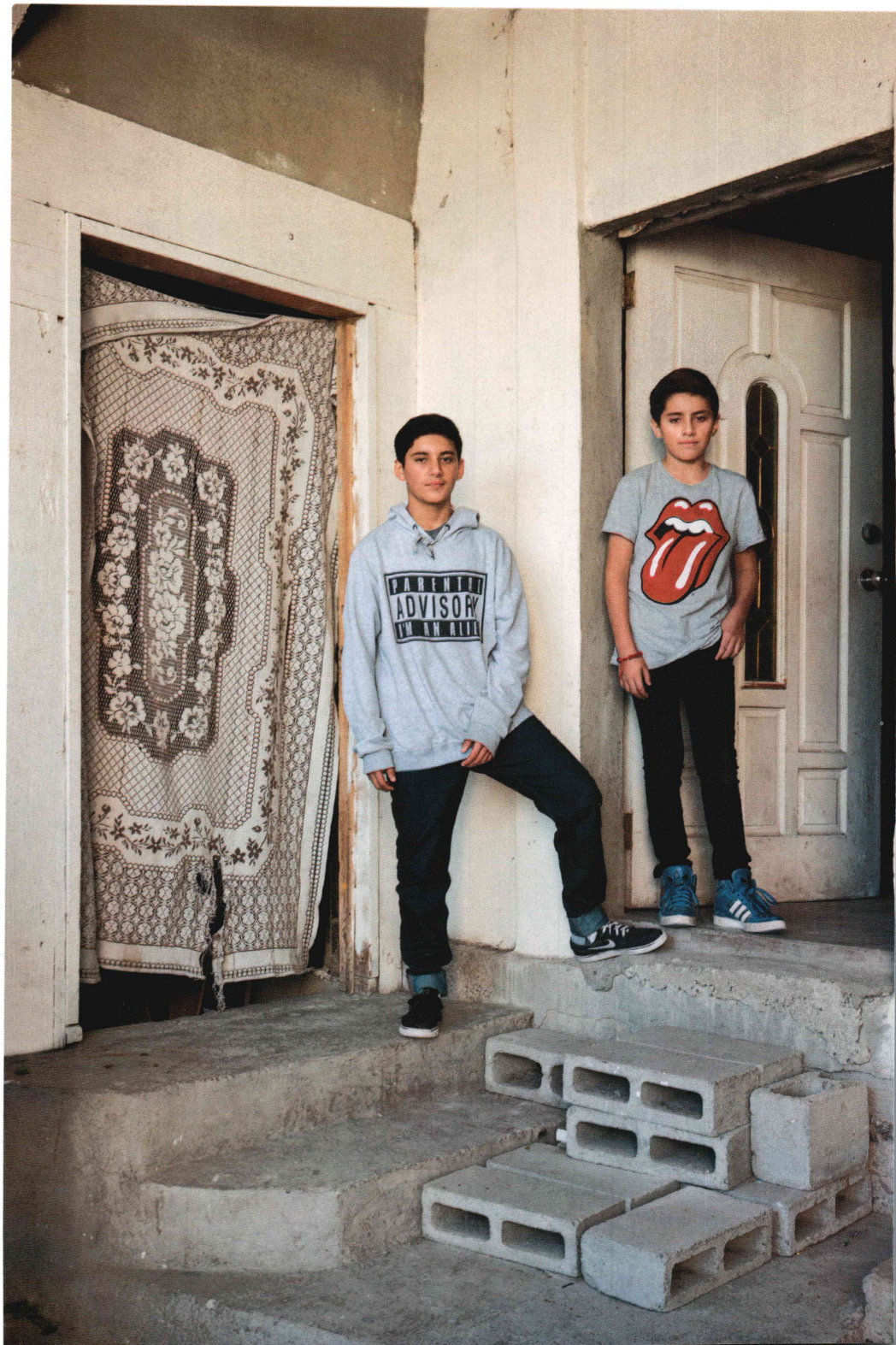
The girls enrolled in the local school, and Ashley soon found herself bullied again. This time, though, it was for being American. Kids laughed at her weird name and her terrible Spanish. Though she'd been a top student back in South Carolina, she was suddenly trying to learn in a language that she couldn't read or write and could barely speak.

When her classmates told Ashley that she didn't belong, she refused to cry in front of them. When she arrived home, though, the tears flowed. It wasn't an easy thing to hear. But that didn't mean she didn't agree with them.

**ASHLEY IS** one of 600,000 American-born children who are believed to be enrolled in K-12 schools across Mexico. Their lives are a reflection of the complicated realities of border politics: of the so-called "mixed-status" families that formed on the U.S. side when a militarized border made it too difficult for workers to go back and forth; of deportation policies that don't take the presence of children into consideration; of the wave of returns that followed the Great Recession, which, for the past ten years, has meant more Mexicans migrating out of the United States than into it. Often, parents choose to leave their American-citizen children, especially older ones, behind with family or friends, deciding that the pain of separation is a lesser burden than the pain of dislocation and displacement. Others bring their kids with them, hoping they'll be able to find their place in a different world.

Theirs is a new and unique generation, one that academics are only beginning to name. "The students we share," a phrase meant to encompass transnational students living on both sides of the border, reflects the hope that the two countries will develop better support for students who researchers broadly agree are being failed educationally. Researchers I spoke to also used "American Mexicans," "the other Dreamers," and "*Los Invisibles*, the invisible ones." Children from "forced cross-border families," offered Maria Dolores Paris Pombo, who teaches sociology at the Colegio de la Frontera Norte. "This problem of being unable to adapt to Mexico or belong to the U.S. — it's a generation that was left in between."

Together, these American children now make up 3 percent of all students in Mexico, though the concentrations vary. In some municipalities where




*Javier and Andrew at their front door*

migration is particularly common, one in ten students is American. Across the country, public schools are scrambling to find the resources to accommodate them. "It's a huge problem for Mexico," Patricia Gándara, a research professor at the UCLA Graduate School of Education, told me. "All these people who just kind of landed there."

Like Ashley, American students in Mexico frequently end up in rural schools, the ones with the fewest resources to help them. No public schools offer Spanish as a Second Language classes, and less than 5 percent of their teachers speak any English. Many families, especially if they were deported unexpectedly, have trouble assembling and authenticating all the various documents that are needed to enroll, which means that kids end up missing months or even years of instruction. Some never return to a classroom. Students are often ineligible for health insurance and other benefits that their Mexican counterparts get. ("We usually think of [these families] as undocumented in the United States, but we never think of them as undocumented in Mexico," one researcher told me.) It all adds up to a rough transition for most kids: American transplants will be much more likely than local students to miss significant time in school, to be in a low grade for their age, to dislike school, to feel alienated from their teachers, and to drop out.

On the outskirts of Tijuana, I met Javier, 13, and Andrew, 11. One day in 2014, after their mother, Eve, drove them to school in Palmdale, California, she was arrested at a traffic stop for unpaid tickets. The next time they saw her was in a detention center. Eve had been in the U.S. for 16 years, and her children had never lived anywhere else. She wished Javier and Andrew, like their older siblings, could have stayed in the United States, if only for the better schools, but they were still so young; they needed her. A judge told Eve that her best chance to be with them again was to plead guilty to an immigration violation. The next day, she was dropped off in Tijuana with only the clothes on her back. A few months later, the boys' aunt drove them over the border to join her.

"I kind of felt like they deported me," Javier said.

Maria Galleta, who has a small office by a border crossing in Tijuana and volunteers her time to help the recently deported adjust to their new lives, remembers explaining to a 12-year-old boy after he told her that he'd been deported from the United States: "You're a citizen! You can't be deported!" This seemed to make little sense to the boy, who replied with the simple truth of his experience. "But," he said, "I can't go back." Daniel Kanstroom, a human rights lawyer, has a term for children like him: "de facto deportees."

Though their new city is within sight of the country of their birth, Javier and Andrew have not set foot in the United States since the day they left, nearly four years earlier. (Not even for Jack in the Box, whose food they mourn like a lost member of their family and which happens to be one of the first businesses you see when entering the U.S. side via the nearby San Ysidro crossing.) They both hope to return someday, but that future seems distant and vague. For now, they are afraid to enter their own country. They wonder if they would get in trouble for trying.

**ASHLEY FAILED** her first year of school in Mexico. It was a painful blow to a girl who had always pushed herself to succeed. But she says her teacher had no patience for giving extra help to a third-grader who couldn't read Spanish. He seemed to think she was stupid or lazy.

**KIDS LAUGHED AT ASHLEY'S WEIRD NAME AND HER TERRIBLE SPANISH. THOUGH SHE'D BEEN A TOP STUDENT BACK IN SOUTH CAROLINA, SHE WAS SUDDENLY TRYING TO LEARN IN A LANGUAGE THAT SHE COULDN'T READ OR WRITE AND COULD BARELY SPEAK.**

*Ashley making tortillas at her grandparents' house, where the family does most of the cooking*

Slowly, the sisters began, as Lesly put it, "to admit already that we were going to live here." They started to appreciate things about their new lives. They spent a lot more time outside than they had when they lived in the States. They were glad to know their grandparents. At first, Ashley hated the food, losing weight, as she refused to eat anything but yogurt. She gradually grew to prefer the new food, which was so fresh — her father, like many men in the region, worked a couple of pieces of land, growing beans, corn, peaches, avocados, and pears both for the family and the market. Still, she saw how difficult the life was, how low the pay, how hard the work. "The sun burns really hot," she said. "You're supposed to work a lot. What if the plants don't grow?"

Lesly spoke up. "My sister's trying to say, if one lives here, one learns the value of things."

It took two years for most of the teasing to drop off. By then, both Ashley's Spanish and her cultural fluency had improved. Eventually, she was at the top of her class again. She realized that one reason the other students had disliked her so much was because they had assumed that she would be racist and elitist toward them. "I am an American," she protested, "but I'm not the type they think." At some point, without noticing, she began dreaming in Spanish instead of English.

But even as English dropped out of their daily lives, the sisters kept speaking it between themselves — it was both a comfort and a fragile

*Ashley at her school, Número 26*

connection to a future that they feared losing. (Today, when Ashley makes a grammatical mistake or forgets an English word, Lesly instantly and firmly corrects her.) When Lesly started at the small local middle school, where classes took the form of government-produced instructional videos, she became a stand-in teacher of other students. What was called an educational workshop — growing flowers and peaches to make money for the school — seemed to simply be work. Many parents and their children weren't concerned. Work in the outlying fields is the main future awaiting boys in the mountain towns, and it's common for girls to drop out as young as 14 or 15 to marry and have children.

The sisters and their parents had different ideas about education. They wanted to go to university someday.

**"THIS PROBLEM OF BEING UNABLE TO ADAPT TO MEXICO OR BELONG TO THE U.S. —**

**IT'S A GENERATION THAT WAS LEFT IN BETWEEN."**

They wanted to keep open the option of returning to the United States to study and to work. They dreamed of owning houses like the ones they remembered in the U.S. Lesly began commuting to a larger school; Ashley, when she reached seventh grade, followed. In their town, they tried to explain the move in ways that wouldn't make people think they were snobby, saying it merely had to do with their personal learning styles. At the new school, both tried, at first, to hide their American backgrounds. But they were found out in English class. It's easy to spot American students, Ashley's English teacher, Oscar Vargas, told me. Even if they don't openly speak English, "you note their way of thinking. They think further. They want careers."

As the years passed, Ashley and Lesly found it more complicated to define who they are or where they belong. "Sometimes, when people ask me where I'm from," said Lesly, "I don't know how to respond." One of the things that makes Lesly feel most American is the history she learned in school — knowing a place's past, she believes, is part of what makes you belong there. Occasionally, she likes to get her U.S. passport out of its safekeeping spot. The words to the preamble to the Constitution, which she memorized long ago for a class project back in South Carolina, are written inside. "Sometimes I just want to read it," she said, "and remind myself that I'm from over there, too."

When Ashley arrived in Mexico, she identified as fully American. "Right now," she told me, "it's half and half." In part, that's because she appreciates aspects of both places, but it's also a reflection of not feeling fully welcome in either. When Ashley was chosen to carry the Mexican flag at Número 26's morning ceremony, other students told her that she had no right. When she asked an old friend in South Carolina how her parents had voted in the 2016 presidential election, the friend didn't want to tell her. Another friend said she no longer wanted Ashley to come back to the United States.

**IN EARLY 2017**, Bryant Jensen, a professor and educational researcher at Brigham Young University, visited Escuela Secundaria Técnica Número 26. He was looking for participants in a study about the educational well-being of American-born children in Mexico. At first, he recalls, the director of the school told him, "*No tenemos esos estudiantes aquí*" — we don't have that kind of student here. But then another staff member in the office spoke up: She could think of a couple of kids. Those students, it turned out, could think of a few more. Jensen quickly had 17 names on his list.

Some of the students walked into the office and introduced themselves to Jensen in perfect English. Others had forgotten the language or moved before they'd had a chance to really learn it. Many had been unaware that the others, even those in the same grade, shared their background. They'd come from Oklahoma, Tennessee, California, New York. I met one of the school's American-born students, a girl whose parents had lived outside Atlanta but left before she was 2, at her mother's small restaurant, up the street from Número 26. Now 14, she has no real memories of her life in the United States. But she had used Google Street View to explore her parents' old neighborhood, to look at images of the hospital where she was born.

Another student, a boy named Leo Gutiérrez Rojas, was a grade above Ashley. He had grown up in Virginia, where his parents worked a variety of jobs: at a furniture factory, a sausage factory, an Elizabeth Arden packaging plant, a Sysco distribution center. When he was 3, Leo's father was in a car accident and ended up imprisoned for three years, though the family never understood whether he was in trouble for the accident or his immigration status. Leo's father was finally deported when Leo was 6, and Leo and his mother, Leticia, followed him to Mexico.

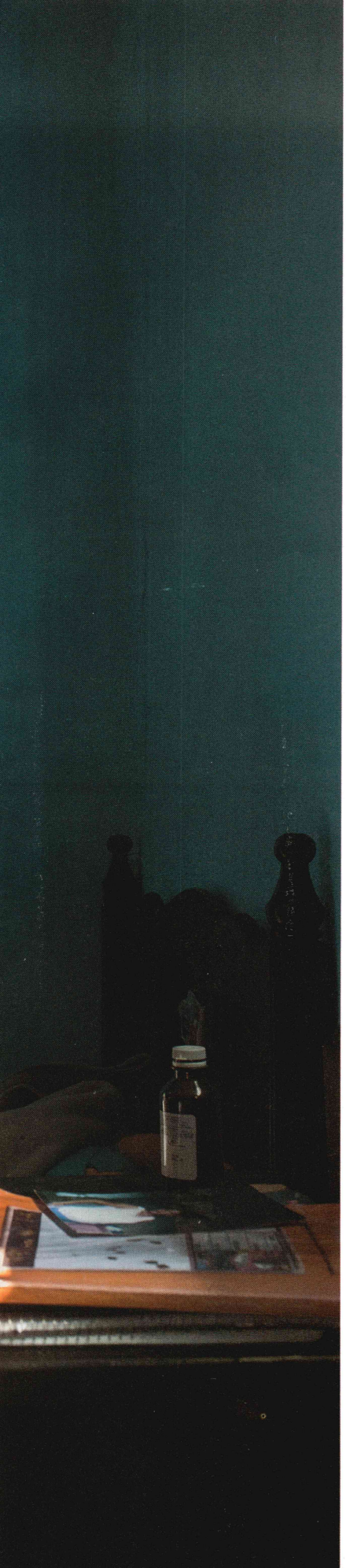
Leo was so young he had little understanding of what had changed. He cried for weeks and kept asking to be taken to the park they used to visit in Virginia, to a friend's house

there, to McDonald's. At school, he was teased for speaking no Spanish and then for gaining weight (like Ashley, he rejected most of the new food, but that meant he ate a lot of tortillas). Determined to fit in, he vowed he would stop speaking English, not even when his dad tried to practice with him. Now he no longer remembers it, though he has a better accent than the other kids in his English class.

At home, Leo is gregarious, flamboyantly funny, but at school he stays quiet. His favorite subjects are math and science, and he dreams of a career in robotics. But the school placed him in the agricultural program.

Leo told me he now thinks of himself as a Mexican who is one part American. ("Because you have a passport," said Leticia. "Because I eat pizza!" Leo replied.) His mom thinks he will return to the United States when he's older, to look for work. For now, though, that's hard for Leo to imagine. "I don't know anyone. I don't know where to go. I don't know pounds, ounces, miles. I don't know how to buy a hamburger!" He turned to his mother. "Does Wendy's still exist? Did I eat there? Did I like it?" When Leo watched the movie *Rio*, about a bird that spends too much time in confinement and is unable to fly when it returns to its natural habitat, it reminded him of himself. "*Creo que así soy yo*," he said — I think that I am like that.

"The dream of most of them is to go back," Eunice Vargas, a researcher who surveyed students at 86 schools in Baja California, told me. (Like Jensen, she found that many schools weren't even aware of the students' presence in order to help them. Schools would often report that they had a student or two and then send an update: "Sorry, we don't have two — we have 20.") The children, as Americans, have the legal right to return, but Vargas fears they will arrive unprepared, having been failed by an educational system not designed to meet their needs, and then be caught in cycles of poverty. That will affect not only them, but the country to which their futures are tied. "How can it be possible that



*Leo Gutiérrez Rojas, who grew up in Virginia, moved to Mexico when he was 6.*

the government of the United States is not concerned about so many American children?" Maria Dolores Paris Pombo asked. "It's like a boomerang! It will go back to the United States. It's a generation that won't have any school or work opportunities. I don't know what will happen to them."

Jensen put the issue succinctly: Though the border may temporarily split lives in two, "there's no such thing as a half-citizen."

One day when I visited Leo's house, he was studying for a test in English class. I offered to quiz him. The test was on verb conjugations, and one of the words was "*estar*."

At first, Leo couldn't remember how to translate it. But then the answers came back to him, and he repeated the conjugations in a deliberate voice with an American accent. "I was," he said. "I am. I will be."

**AFTER THE MORNING** ceremony at Número 26, Ashley went to math class. She sat with her best friend at school, Azunama, who also commutes from a smaller town so that she doesn't have to take classes by TV. The two girls worked quietly on their classwork, plotting points on a graph until the design that linked them — an apple — became visible; the rest of the classroom was full of talking and laughter. Things got more raucous in the next period, when the social studies teacher didn't show, no substitute arrived for 20 minutes, and some boys decided to climb out a window. The girls took notes from their history textbook, which offered a short section about the civil rights movement in the U.S. In gym, as the students giggled through an exercise routine, the teacher described a previous class when he had four newly arrived American students, and the one who was bilingual translated for the rest.

In a few weeks, summer vacation would begin, and Lesly would graduate from high school. She was thinking she would try to continue studying in Mexico for a while longer, at least. Both she and Ashley like the idea of becoming teachers themselves, but getting back to the U.S. and trying to get into and pay for college there felt daunting. I asked Ashley whether she would take a chance to study back in her home country, if it came. She burst into laughter at the absurdity of the question. "Yes!" she said. "Yes! A thousand times, yes!"

The final period of the day was English class. Ashley sat in the front row. Oscar Vargas, the teacher, called on her when other students struggled — "Your colleague Ashley will help us," he said — but even with the distractions, she still found the period long and tedious. "It's like a review of elementary," she said. Midway through the class, the students pulled out their grammar workbooks, but Ashley's desk stayed empty. She had finished the workbook more than six months earlier, out of boredom: The Mexico City earthquake that made news the previous fall had shaken the small towns beneath the volcano relentlessly, knocking down houses and churches and schools. Número 26 stayed standing despite damage, but it took months of rebuilding before the students returned to class. To pass the time, Ashley had read and reread her textbooks.

The school day ended. The crooked streets filled once again with throngs of yelling, ambling, laughing students. Ashley stayed by Número 26, waiting for the minibus to arrive. She had a long road home.

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**IT'S EASY TO SPOT AMERICAN STUDENTS, ASHLEY'S ENGLISH TEACHER TOLD ME. "YOU NOTE THEIR WAY OF THINKING. THEY THINK FURTHER. THEY WANT CAREERS."**

★ It's the essential American ideal. We just can't agree on what it means. Our correspondent hits the road in search of answers.

# Freed is

By Chris Colin

One night a few years ago, Libby Hunter went to dinner near her home in Michigan. Hunter spent her career as a middle school choir director and music teacher, and after retiring had become active in local politics. Fourteen times at Ann Arbor City Council meetings she's broken into song. My favorite is her "Ode to the Police Courts Building."

But on this evening, Hunter just wanted some dinner. She walked into the restaurant only to find that the music was too loud, so she chose a seat outside instead.

The music inside wasn't weirdly loud or complain-to-the-manager loud. It was loud in precisely the way she'd come to expect of public spaces. Cafés, bars, shopping centers, grocery stores, doctor's offices — all had increasingly filled themselves with elevator music, Top 40, and the like in her lifetime. Without anyone's permission, inane background music had become a de facto aural wallpaper for everyone. It wasn't just the intrusion of unwanted music that irked her. It was the thoughts it edged out.

Hunter spotted an acquaintance eating outside, a fellow musician. Like her, the imposition of someone else's musical choices had driven him to an outdoor table. They got to talking, and he told her about Pipedown, a campaign for "freedom from piped music." The founder is a British author named Nigel Rodgers, who started the movement in 1992. "And I objected on the grounds of liberty," he has said. "We shouldn't have to have this mind control." For Hunter, a frustration that had been simmering indistinctly suddenly came into focus. By the end of the night, she was a dyed-in-the-wool anti-background-music-in-public-places freedom fighter.

Hunter went on to co-found Quiet Ann Arbor, the first chapter of Pipedown to form in the U.S. Since then, she has developed a network of fellow quiet enthusiasts, a kind of shushing army. An app on her phone measures the decibel levels at commercial establishments. She has a running list of the good ones. When she enters a place that's playing music, she asks the merchants to turn it off. Usually they decline, but that's not my point. None of this is my point.

**THERE'S A NUMBER** I've managed to carry around for the past 14 years, one I've long suspected of saying something significant about our country. Twenty-two. That's how many times then-President George W. Bush, at the height of his oratorical powers, mentioned freedom during a roughly 45-minute speech to the Naval Academy in 2005. Allowing for applause breaks, that's about one freedom every two minutes. Imagine sitting next to the guy on a cross-country flight. He'd drop the f-bomb 165 times before you landed.

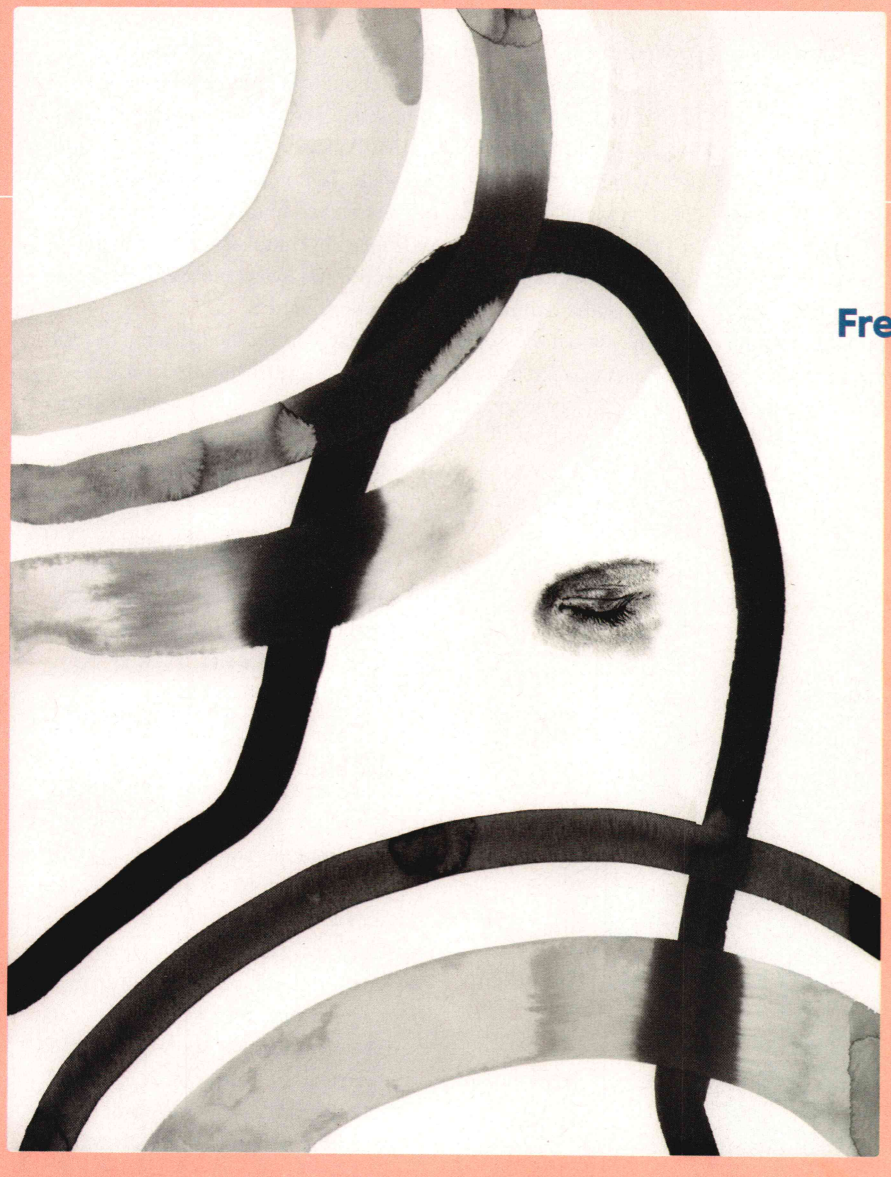
I submit we all live on that flight. During the Bush years, this rhetorical tic greased our path into the Iraq quagmire, of course, but it also helped shoehorn the country into its massive mortgage crisis: Bush's "ownership society" nudged millions of citizens into bad loans on the premise of "more freedom and more control over your own life." Before that, he launched the USA Freedom Corps in 2002, followed by the so-called Freedom Agenda, his tectonic foreign-policy shift away from "[s]ixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East."

Republicans owned the idea in their way, but Obama deployed it with his own intonation, announcing his candidacy with a wish to "usher in a new birth of freedom on this earth." And it's not just politicians, of course. Eager to shed its establishment vibe, corporate America long ago co-opted the personal-freedom language of the '60s. The CEO of Dreyer's has equated ice cream with freedom, and skin-care professionals have linked freedom with the removal of unsightly neck bands. The Scientologists put out the magazine *Freedom*, and the Valley Forge Freedom played hockey. You may "learn to beat the IRS" at Freedom Law School or live in any of more than a dozen places in the U.S. called Freedom. If you had the money, you could buy a Freedom yacht. If you were more in a Slurpee mood, you could go to 7-Eleven, "where freedom's waiting for you."

Then came Donald Trump, and in those first months of his campaign, freedom's regular, salmon-like return to the national discourse appeared to have halted. His was the province of petty grievances and personal boasts, not chest-thumping invocations of freedom or, for that matter, higher ideals of any sort. The right-leaning liberty community debated whether he even cared. But then an interesting shift happened. As the country became more familiar with his reflexive disdain for political correctness and almost compulsive flouting of social norms, a dawning realization seemed to take hold. It's not that he cared or didn't care about freedom. He *was* freedom.

For those attuned to such frequencies, Trump's torrent of unfiltered id was a bold new expression of liberty. Rather than advocating for freedom, he incarnated it, unbound by cultural mores, institutional tradition, or even law. For a political class in the thrall of freedom, he was the inevitable next step.

The backdrop for Trump's embodiment of freedom is a landscape of diminishing liberty



Artwork by James Zucco

# Freedom is *a quiet restaurant*

for large swaths of the country. Economic freedom eludes more and more of the population. The prison-industrial complex amounts to a scale of freedom-stealing unprecedented in history. Someone's civil liberties are denied in some new and awful way each day. Without much squinting, #MeToo can be seen very much as a freedom fight. Even the freedom to trust that the government will adhere to its own laws — asylum protocol, say — has withered.

But often, the freedom banner waves most prominently over other causes entirely. These causes don't, on their surface anyway, suggest the sort of disenfranchisement and oppression that initially got this country and its central conceit up and running.

Freedom is used for limiting abortion access ("freedom for the unborn"), opposing gun control (America's first freedom, per the NRA), rallying around Supreme Court nominees (the correct ones will protect our religious liberties), and assailing immigration (immigrants equal stolen jobs equal less economic freedom). Advocates for net neutrality mobilized supporters around a vision of freedom, and so did opponents.

George Carlin once noted that our country was founded by slaveholders who longed for freedom. Where did that bizarre schism deposit us? And what does this vague abstraction mean to actual people?

**A FEW YEARS AGO** on a hot July morning in Las Vegas, I took an escalator to Planet Hollywood's carpeted second-floor conference area. There, above the ceaseless chiming, a sea of freedom opened up before me. For the next four days, an annual gathering called FreedomFest would take place here, the "world's largest gathering of free minds." Imagine an even whiter Woodstock featuring not Jimi Hendrix and Richie Havens but Glenn Beck, John Stossel, and Peter Thiel, plus an odd mix of novelists, pot advocates, rare-coin collectors, Langston Hughes enthusiasts, powdered-wig Constitutionalists, and Paul Krugman, all bonding and learning, and sometimes hugging, and once or twice grooving to "Go Your Own Way" and "Free Fallin'."

Right away, I fell into conversation with a muscular young man in a black suit I'll call Ben. He had ruddy cheeks and erect, Army-ish posture. In his hands was a silvery metal called rhenium. Ben worked for a rare and strategic metals company, one of more than a hundred businesses that had paid for booths here. →

"It's not a financial asset like gold or silver," he said when I asked about the connection between rhenium and freedom. I gather my face looked blank. He lowered his voice: "No reporting requirement."

The freedom not to pay tax, in other words. There's more to it — getting into metal means getting away from the dollar, which also appeals to the freedom crowd — but that was the gist. In that interpretation of the law, something potent lurked. "Most citizens are so ingrained in the 'matrix,' they think they're still free," read a line from the company's marketing literature. Ben, for his part, exuded the giddy intensity of someone about to liberate his fellow man.

For the attendees of FreedomFest, freedom is neither cable news buzzword nor faux-inspirational flourish. It's a full-time lifestyle into which pretenders merely wade. In Ben's case, the seeds of his passion for niche financial subversion and liberty as a whole proved to be just that — seeds, the helicoptering kind that would twirl down from his parents' maple tree in suburban Maryland. Some of those seeds started landing in the neighbor's yard.

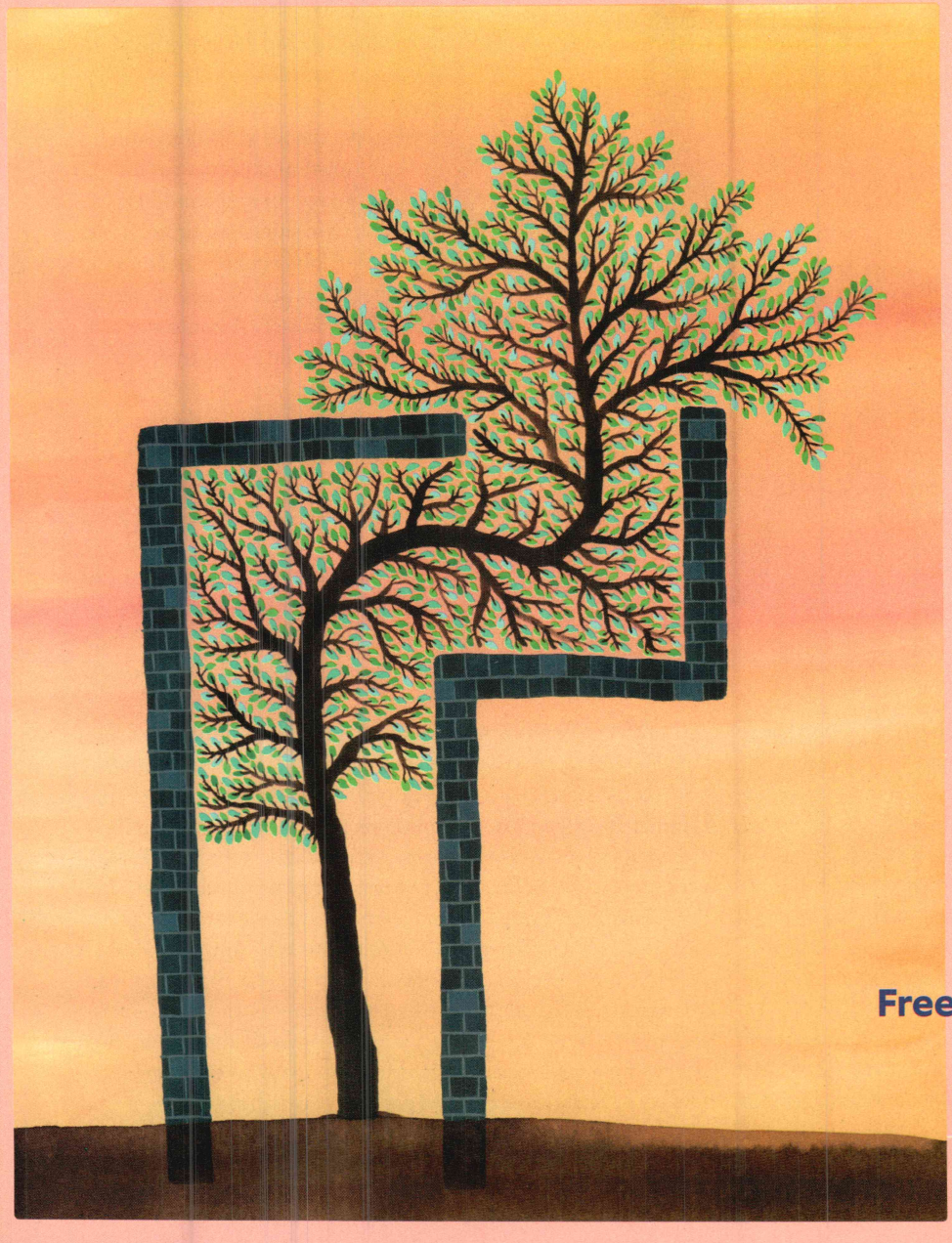
"They said it was 'soiling the property,'" he recalled, his rosy cheeks burning with remembered vexation. "Soiling the property. It was a tree!"

Things proceeded to get ugly between the two homes. Bitter words were exchanged, and then out came the leaf blowers. Back and forth they'd blast the pods across their private DMZ. Eventually, the neighbors moved away. Ben's father spoke of a simpler time, when people were granted more latitude, when freedom was the de facto state — for whom I cannot say.

"They probably thought they were fighting for their freedom to have a seedpod-*free* lawn," I said gamely, but freedom didn't seem to be a philosophical topic for Ben.

"Yeah, I don't know," he said and looked off into the distance.

For a grand idea ostensibly rooted in a profound human experience, Ben and his fellow FreedomFesters seemed fixated on its inverse. How are we *not* free? What impedes our freedom? Over the next few days, I would watch the president of the Foundation for Economic Education deliver a rousing assault on the "compulsory insanity" of economic equality. I met attendees who used freedom to explain why climate change isn't real and why the Supreme Court's gay marriage ruling is an affront to liberty rather than an extension of




Artwork by Balint Zsako

Often, the freedom banner waves most prominently over other causes entirely. These causes don't, on their surface anyway, suggest disenfranchisement and oppression.

it. I heard ex-Congressman Allen West caution against African Americans using skin color as "a crutch" and declare himself the embodiment of Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream.

The longer I stayed, the more I longed to understand what freedom even means — not at the familiar culture-wars level where it's generally invoked, but at a few thousand existential feet above. Freedom's a remarkably squishy concept to be promoted by our government, the same dry souls, after all, who gave us the 1040-EZ form.

Then I stumbled upon a debonair man in a bow tie giving a talk in one of the conference rooms.

His name was Jeffrey Tucker, and I learned later he's a luminary in the liberty movement. Picture Donald Sutherland in his younger and more regal days. He was instantly charming — he pronounced "theater" as "thee-uh-tuh," summed up his fellow libertarians as people who are annoying at Thanksgiving — and palpably exhausted with the freedom movement's "fixation on government." More important, he said, is "the broader experience of freedom."

Tucker has an electric mind; one minute he was talking about how the U.S. court system is a conspiracy against poor black people, the next, Mahler. Every few minutes, someone tiptoed up to gush about his work on cryptocurrencies, or de Tocqueville, or his call to legalize drunk driving. He disarmed them with something witty and self-deprecating, then got back to granting my request, which was to lay out a vision of what freedom is. "What I saw in Brazil," he replied plainly.

He'd been in São Paulo lecturing on intellectual property ("which I don't believe in") and one night wound up in a bar with a view of the whole city, 12 million people. "As far as my eyes could see, there were lights and buildings and civilization burgeoning — an awesome amount of human knowledge, energy, innovation, creative capacity right in front of me. I began to turn, and it was true over here, and over there, and in every single direction, and I thought, *That's it! This world will never be governed. It cannot be governed.* It was beautiful.... And I think that's the purpose of freedom, to get ever closer to true and beautiful things."

"DEEP LIKE THE grandest canyon / Wild like an untamed stallion," sang Kid Rock in "Born Free." Chevrolet heard this and thought: special-edition freedom truck.

The 2016 Chevrolet Silverado 3500HD, designed in conjunction with the singer, is a synergistic bonanza of vaguely freedom-ish accouterments, including but not limited to "leather-appointed seats featuring metallic-appearing inserts patterned after acid-wash jeans," per the marketing copy. "This truck is all about celebrating the people who build it and the freedom it enables," Rock said in that same press release. Anyway, I had promised my friend Mac a ride to his then-home in Ashland and wanted very much to rent a Silverado. I couldn't find one, so I took the family Prius.

My first stop was just over the Bay Bridge. Oakland was wet and spring-y, and Mac was waiting in front of the apartment building where he'd been staying. I've known him eight years. He's long and lithe, like a whippet up on its hind legs. We hugged and were off. Oakland gave way to Berkeley, Berkeley to Solano County, and then there were cows and clouds and a dry riverbed and rows of nut trees and turkeys strutting near a paintball range. Mac lowered his window and executed a turkey call.

As with every road trip I've ever been on, I wondered if we were doing it right — were we having the quintessential American experience that supposedly happens whenever you get out on a Western highway, or were we just driving to Oregon?

"If we'd only ever ridden on horses, then maybe this would be liberating?" Mac said.

This struck me as a good time to tell him about Marathon Petroleum. In a flurry of YouTube enthusiasm before this trip, I'd come across a commercial for a gas station that I watched more times than I care to admit. The spot's vibe is that of an American flag mating with a bald eagle. A serviceman home from duty throws off his pack and sweeps his gal up in his arms. A motorcycle roars down a country road. A grinning teen dangles her hand from a car window. At one point, a young woman actually writes *freedom* in the air with a sparkler. A dude whose shades reflect Marathon's red, white, and blue solemnly takes in all this majesty.

Meanwhile, over jangly classic-rock guitar, a voice belts out a song called "Full Tank of Freedom," written specifically for this commercial. "So get a full tank of freedom / Drive the American road / And with a full tank of freedom / Find your own highway, we'll take you wherever you go." →

"We have no say-so here because we don't have the numbers they have in the big cities. They take our water, they limit our guns, they kill our industry, and there's nothing we can do."

As creative director at a Cleveland ad agency called Wyse, Lane Strauss oversaw the spot for Marathon, which comprises 5,600 independently owned gas stations across 17 states. About 15 years ago, Wyse was tasked with devising a campaign that would get at the essence of Marathon gas. After much consumer research, his team concluded that the essence was you-know-what. They began marshaling that familiar freedom vibe: windows down, music blaring, nothing mattering but the highway.

As I saw it, Strauss was an Oz-like figure, pulling the cranks and levers that reinforce that classic American narrative, which in turn buttresses all the invasions and political campaigns in need of cultural reinforcement. Hell, it buttresses people's faith in weird metals. Which is all to say, I phoned Strauss expecting him to be some dark combination of Donald Rumsfeld and Don Draper, loading me up with patriotism and Sterling Cooper mind games.

But Strauss's personal experiences with freedom bore little resemblance to the freedom I saw in his commercial. Once, in the process of adopting his daughter in Bogotá, he found himself confronted with the afternoon siesta. He was struck by it — for all our interest in freedom, he said, Americans would never voluntarily free themselves from work like this. Now, reflecting on it with me on the phone, he realized he himself had fallen victim to this mindset: He didn't think he'd taken a vacation day all year. "The other day, I caught myself thinking in terms of having to use my vacation days, rather than wanting to go on vacation," he said.

The banality of how freedom gets manufactured felt telling — a friendly adman gets a job, the job is to hawk gas, the pattern of casually enshrining this idea continues apace. Hum "Full Tank of Freedom" enough and you start wondering if commercials like these sell us a *desire* for freedom as much as anything. From there you start to wonder whose aims are serviced by that aspiration. And then you keep driving because your friend needs to get to Ashland.

On we went, Mac and I, here a dry riverbed, there a field of upside-down pools. My blather about freedom was not entirely academic to him. Nine days earlier, he'd forged a powerful new relationship with liberation himself, having two confining breasts, vestiges of a confining gender, removed by a Bay Area doctor. The first seven-plus years of our friendship, Mac lived as a woman. He lived three-plus decades as a woman and got married as a woman and, at last, accepted that the woman part was erroneous. What followed was a grueling period of preparation and then a fairly rugged surgery — as we drove, a tight fabric binder around his chest all but squeezed the life out of him — and the coming months would most likely be tough, too. A few miles outside Sacramento, he was smiling so broadly I had to ask what the hell was going on.

"I'm happy!" he said.

"Say more about that."

"It was just so awful, and now it's not. I'm more me now. I'm — yeah, I feel free."

**IN THE 1850S**, the frontiersman poet Joaquin Miller came to Yreka. There, 18 remote miles below the Oregon border, a "tide of people poured up and down, and across from other streets, as strong as in a town of the East." The Gold Rush story was in many ways a freedom story. The lure of instant wealth was the dream of liberation from poverty, and the ultimate disappointment for most miners was freedom's shimmering mirage.

It's about a century and a half later when Mac and I pull off the freeway to cruise old Highway 99. Once, this was the Golden State Highway; it carried travelers and farmworkers from Mexico clear to Canada. At the height of the timber boom that followed the Gold Rush, the region produced a phenomenal amount of lumber. Now it's a decommissioned afterthought to I-5, which opened in 1968. Industry left years ago. With its old barbershop and clock store and once-grand 19th-century hotel where Rutherford B. Hayes slept, West Miner Street in Yreka is a museum of its former self.

It was a chilly afternoon when we wandered into a divey beige bar. Inside, the music blasted and a middle-aged bartender passed pints to large, tired-looking men in Carhartts. I ordered a beer and started chatting with the guy beside me at the bar. His name is Cody Moser. He's 32 and he's lived in Yreka all his life. His mom waited tables and tended bar, and works in a machine factory now. His dad works at a mill in nearby Weed. Moser does auto body and painting, and has no plans to leave, but he won't be introducing any new Mosers to the world anytime soon. "I love kids, but I'm not bringing one into this," he said.

Once upon a time, Yreka was a lively, happy place, he said. Then the environmentalists down south decimated the timber industry, and the town all but dropped dead.

SOURCE IMAGE: CHEVROLET

"There used to be a community — there were chili cook-offs, cruise nights, sidewalk sales. It's all gone. Jobs are gone. Town's dried up," he said. "There's nothing to do now but get in trouble. I've watched so many of my brother's friends die or go to jail. Drugs, crime. There's nothing here anymore."

There's no shortage of American towns that find themselves in similar straits. But few attach themselves to a narrative like the one circulating here.

"We have no say-so here because we don't have the numbers they have in the big cities," Moser continued. "They take our water, they limit our guns, they kill our industry, and there's nothing we can do. Except, you know."

"What?"

"Secede."

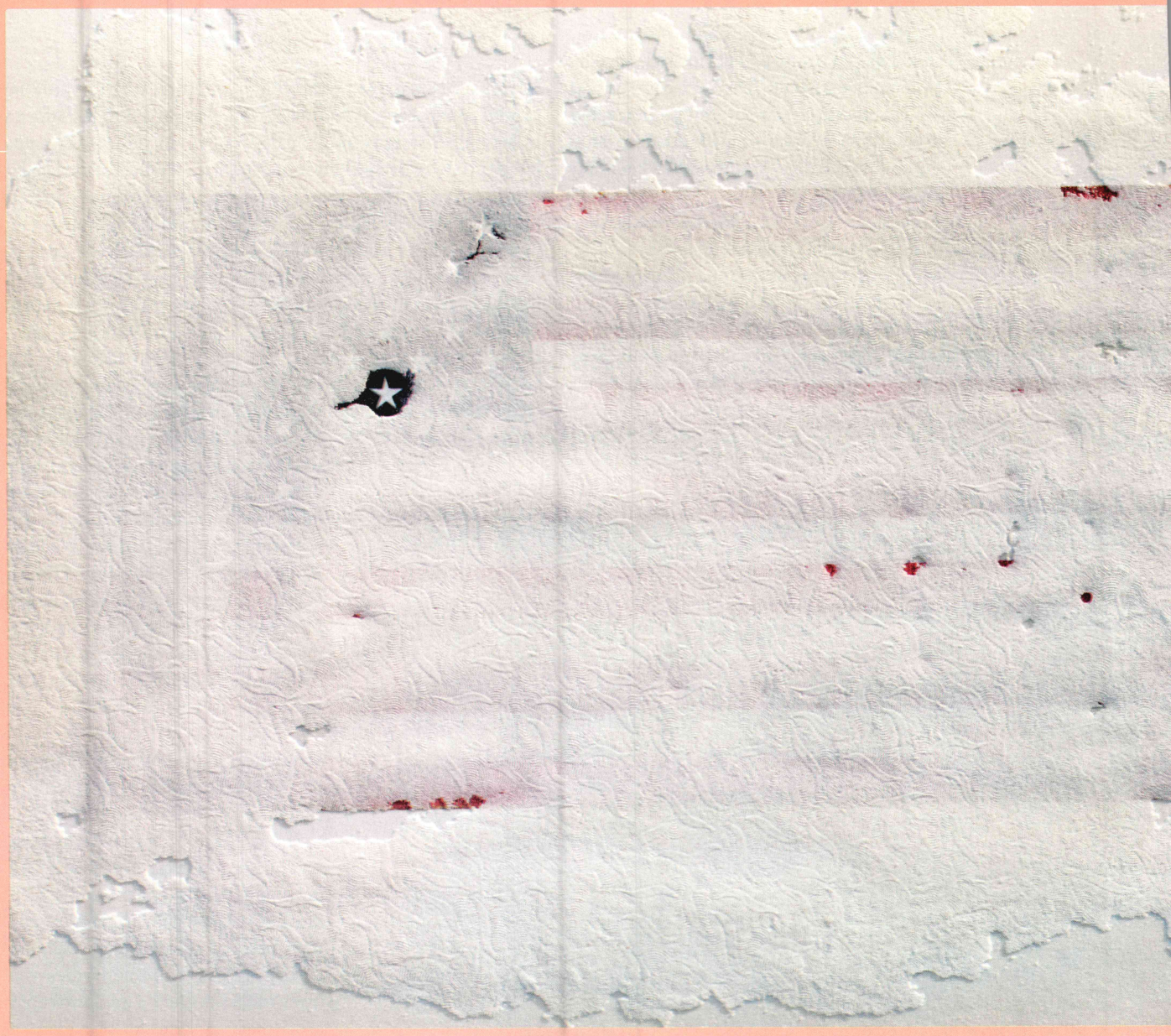
Yreka isn't just a struggling old boomtown. It's the would-be capital of the State of Jefferson, what was meant to become an independent state — and one day will, if you believe the signs hung outside every other business. The State of Jefferson movement contends that the state's population centers tilt the balance of power unfairly toward the cities. The sentiment dates back more than three-quarters of a century. As Jefferson people will tell you, citizens here actually began to secede in the winter of 1941, throwing up roadblocks on the highway and even electing their own governor (albeit in the middle of the night, after some drinking). Then Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The cause was suspended for national unity, but it never went away, and recent years have seen a resurgence.

We talked awhile longer, then I left him to his beer. The secession argument had not moved Mac, who dropped some state-budget science on me as we pressed on to Ashland. But Moser knew the unlikelihood of a successful secession as much as anyone. Whether it came to pass, freedom elevated Yreka's economic distress to something larger. Their struggle isn't just jobs and laws, but the very ideal this country was founded on. Freedom is what's been taken, and freedom is what they have left.

**SOMEWHERE AROUND** where the Klamath River juts off to the east, a pair of testicles cut in front of Mac and me.

If the State of Jefferson is pre-revolution America, "truck nuts" are the triumphalist aftermath. You've seen them: two fake gonads dangling defiantly from trailer hitches and bumpers around the country. They first came on the scene in the 1990s; legislation was introduced to ban them, and articles were published in defense of them. A South Carolina man was pulled over for sporting an item "flesh-colored, anatomically correct, approximately the size of a softball, and in clear view of the public," according to the officer's report. →

Artwork by Lizzie Gill



Artwork by Priya Kambli

Invoking the nation's agricultural past in a *Washington Post* interview, the founder of Your Nutz asked, "Did all the little donkeys and sheep walk around with their panties on so children wouldn't see their bodies?" According to my research, they didn't. But his larger point dovetailed with that of truck nuts as a whole: In the name of liberty, it is a duty and an honor to flout civility.

After depositing Mac in Ashland, I turned around and headed southeast, through Shasta-Trinity National Forest, past Shasta Lake, through gray Redding. Two precious audio hours I devoted to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, which I hadn't read since adolescence. The book glosses differently these days. There can be no better encapsulation of white men's freedom than hearing about yet another rain-soaked, insane-looking drifter who nonetheless gets picked up every time he sticks out his thumb. Sal Paradise was just leaving Chicago when I arrived in Chico.

I'd come to meet a 62-year-old woman named Hildy Langewis. Langewis's freedom story began with a ferret. It was the 1970s; she was living in

SOURCE IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

"I feel every day — this is what every black man in America feels — somewhat terrorized. I have to be careful daily, daily. Do I feel free? Mostly. But at the same time, I'm still concerned every time I'm out in public. How free is *that*?"

## Freedom is SECESSION.

Tampa, Florida; the ferret was a beloved pet. But then life brought her to California, and she learned that her pet was forbidden there. "Just another ridiculous regulation that has no basis in fact," she said.

Upon arriving on the West Coast, she became a ferret freedom fighter. She headed a rescue program that she'd run for the next 17 years, transporting more than a thousand illegal ferrets out of state to spare them the fates promised by Fish and Game. Her program would drive them to ferret shelters in Reno, Las Vegas, and Medford, Oregon. Sometimes they were flown to Phoenix. Along the way, a lesson took hold. "It introduced me to the way the government isn't working for the people in California," she said.

These days, her pursuit of freedom takes a more purified form. Langewis is one of the organizers of the Chico gun show. Her job is a mix of logistics and ideology. I paid my $8 (children get in free) at the Chico Masonic Center and walked into a sprawl of display cases and folding tables.

Toward the center, standing behind one of the tables, was Langewis. In addition to helping organize the show, she was there as the proprietor of Jefferson Outfitters, which sells hoodies and patches and key chains at the intersection of secession and the NRA. "Celebrate Liberty!" is its motto. Arranged near her was a collection of hats doing just that, ostensibly focused on the Second Amendment but with broader overtones: DON'T TREAD ON MY FREEDOM and FREEDOM ISN'T FREE and FREE MEN DON'T NEED PERMISSION.

Langewis and I had spoken on the phone a couple of times; in person, she was reserved and reluctant. I decided to chat first with one of her co-organizers, a bearded 60-something man named Blair Snyder. Immediately, perhaps thinking I'd come to discuss it, he brought up the Parkland shooting, just a month earlier — 17 students and staff members killed at the Florida high school. I told him I assumed this had left a cloud over today's gathering.

"Actually, it's usually, sad to say, good for business whenever there's a mass shooting," Snyder said. He shrugged.

"Or when Obama said they were going to ban all guns," he added after some reflection.

I'd vowed not to get sucked into any arguments here, but the mass-shooting comment undid me momentarily.

"Obama never said that," I replied.

"Oh yes, he did."

For the next two minutes, we took turns citing our preferred news sources. We were having, of course, a meta-conversation about another freedom entirely — our freedom to filter reality so easily these days. As we talked, a vendor sitting nearby mentioned an article claiming that Australia has just as many knife deaths as we have gun deaths. It was then that a guy selling rifles near him learned there was a journalist in the room.

"Get a rope," he called out. It was a Trumpian kill-the-media joke, the kind spoken without a smile. His name is Matt Glass and he lives in Chico. After laying out his hatred of journalists, he told me an article about freedom is overdue, on account of the unfair gas taxes he pays.

"Where does it stop?" he asked. "That's why we're here. It's about freedom."

I turned back to Langewis, who explained how she ended up here.

It had been an ordinary day in Hayward, and she'd just gotten home from work. That's when she noticed her cats acting strangely — looking up at the ceiling anxiously, looking at her, pacing. Then a floorboard overhead creaked. Someone was in the house.

Terrified, she dialed 911 and ran outside, only to be told that she was beyond Hayward's city limits. This meant it would take longer for the sheriff's deputy to get there. She had just run to her neighbor's place when she heard her front door open. She never saw the intruder, only heard

As Garcia began telling people about the liberation she'd found, it became clear she was striking a chord. It was friends and family first, then bigger groups.

him run away. That night her boyfriend came by. "If you're going to live alone, you need one of these," he said and handed her a revolver.

Gun ownership was a revelation — another realm of government overreach. She was astonished to hear how long she had to wait to buy one, what kinds were prohibited, and so on.

But if regulation sparked the flame, fear has been the fuel. Sitting beside a pile of Second Amendment hats, she opened up about her growing unease. "I worry about my safety all the time," she said. "I avoid the mall. I avoid downtown. I've seen the transients that hang out in the parking lots and corner people demanding money. I'm getting older. My boyfriend has an artificial leg. He can't run or fight. He could be easily pushed over. My right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness is being threatened."

I spent another hour drifting around the tables, nodding as I was told to buy my assault rifle while I still can, nodding as someone else told me there's no such thing as an assault rifle — the government invented that term. Are all these people scared of transients? Did they have a gateway ferret in their lives? What kinds of booths would they have sat at 50 years ago, before the Second Amendment became the cause it did? I drove back to San Francisco mostly in silence, no Kerouac, no writing *freedom* in the air with a sparkler.

**JIM LUCAS WAS RECENTLY** talking to me about the state of freeness for a black man in America. He spoke with the baffled gravitas of someone who's seen a lifetime of slow progress followed lately by prominent reminders of all that thwarts that progress. Renewed voter disenfranchisement efforts in Southern black communities. The steady drip of videos showing police violence.

"I feel every day — this is what every black man in America feels — somewhat terrorized. I have to be careful daily, daily. Do I feel free? Mostly. But at the same time, I'm still concerned every time I'm out in public. How free is *that*?"

Lucas first became acquainted with the subject growing up on a farm in segregation-era Louisiana. In 1963, a movement to register black voters took shape in Lucas's town.

"Back then, they could call your loans if you registered. Fire you from your job, too. Our farm had a mortgage. My dad had a job in town, as most farmers do, at a store that sold clothes and shoes. He was the only black salesperson in town. He called my four brothers and six sisters and me into the family room for a meeting. I've never seen my mom so afraid in all my life. But we decided yeah, he was going to register to vote."

The next day, Lucas's father put on one of his finest suits and made the trip into town. Lucas and one of his brothers joined him — they wanted to be there for it. I asked how he remembered feeling.

"Feeling?"

"Were you scared? Proud? Excited?"

"All of that. We always felt all of that then."

Lucas went on to graduate from high school and college, then got hired by the Department of Agriculture. He eventually became a manager within his agency and by the mid-'70s had been transferred to the national office in Washington, D.C.

"The USDA was known as 'the last plantation' at the time," he said. "I was fighting there for my own promotion and other black folks'." Lucas wasn't a lawyer, but he became an expert on civil rights law. Anyone having a problem, they'd come to him.

All the while, Lucas had another life as well. He is — and I hadn't even known this was a thing — a successful Martin Luther King Jr. impersonator.

Lucas doesn't like that word; he says he channels King. Whatever the term, I can attest to a startling transformation.

"And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice," Lucas intoned solemnly during the performance I saw. His voice was strong and quavering at once, a combination that might be jarring if it wasn't so profoundly familiar. For ten moving and slightly surreal minutes, he was a one-man civil rights cover band, pivoting seamlessly from "I Have a Dream" to "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

In the 1980s, when Lucas was still working in D.C., he participated in the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington and wondered why no actor was there to perform King's "I Have a Dream" speech. He began to spend evenings and weekends in a library researching King material, reading as much as he could, watching all available footage, listening to vinyl records of King's speeches. "Eventually, I knew everything he did, and why, and when, and with whom," he said.

It all began to take the shape of a campaign: Lucas felt urgently that a holiday commemorating King had to be celebrated. For three years, he'd go to any church and any meeting open to the public

SOURCE IMAGE: GK HART/GETTY IMAGES

and ask for a few minutes to speak. Every time, he'd make an impassioned argument for the holiday, urging people to contact their representatives about it. At the end of each talk, he'd conclude with an excerpt from "I Have a Dream." His ability to summon King's essence struck people.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day was first celebrated as a federal holiday in 1986. Having at that point become a self-made King expert, Lucas developed a one-man show about him, attended acting school, got a booking agency, and began to perform. Word got out. At first, he was getting booked every January and then every February for Black History Month. Gradually, he was performing more frequently, sometimes multiple times a day. Over the past 30-some years, Lucas has stood on hundreds of stages around the world, including at FreedomFest, where I first saw him. Occasionally, he's hired to put on a longer show. Often enough, his job is simply to reprise King's greatest hits.

A person looking for evidence of freedom's march could certainly find it in Lucas's life, could find it in American history more broadly. Slavery ended, women got the vote, children stopped having to plow the fields all the damn time. But if the moral universe has bent gradually toward justice, it has also bent in a dozen other directions.

Lucas's stage career speaks to a desire to see King himself, alive again, conferring a bespoke sermon from another era upon this one. It's a little confounding, that dynamic. I cried throughout the performance I saw. But I also caught echoes of America's broader and often unsettled relationship with civil rights: King is celebrated, but his message is contained. His more radical words are seldom heard. I doubt all the audience members clapping beside me would attend a Black Lives Matter event with the same enthusiasm. No holiday honors those currently advancing his work.

Artwork by Lola Dupré

**Freedom is** owning a pet ferret.

"**FREEDOM IS A THING** you have to keep earning and practicing," Mac told me some months after he got his surgery. He sounded a little downcast. "My liberation from the vestiges of female socialization — I still contend with those every day. The other day, one of my roommates was cleaning the house, and I got this super-nervous feeling. I felt like I was supposed to be doing the cleaning, like he was doing something that's not his job. It doesn't matter that I never intellectually believed that women are supposed to be the cleaners." How free Mac had felt on our drive, that broad smile, gobbling at the turkeys. But there is external freedom and there is internal freedom. It's not always a straight line from one to the other.

I first met Michael Scott Moore in my early 20s, soon after moving to the West Coast. He was a fellow writer, and we joined some mutual acquaintances in a little Bay Area writing circle. Michael was surfer-handsome and soft-spoken, with a

## Freedom is within.

droll kind of reserve. I didn't know many Californians and took him to be emblematic, though in fact, he was as much German as he was Golden State. Eventually, life nudged us in different directions.

More than a dozen years later, Michael came back into my life, at first in a blurry video. In early 2012, he had traveled to Somalia to research a book on piracy. He had done significant preparation to ensure the reporting could happen safely, but one day, driving with his armed guard on a dusty road outside Galkayo, his car was stopped by a flatbed truck with an anti-aircraft gun attached to the back. Roughly a dozen men got off the truck, began firing guns into the air, and jerked him out of the car, breaking his wrist and his glasses in the process. They threw him into an SUV and sped away.

Michael was held hostage for 977 days in a series of hidden locations around the country. Shackled about the ankles, deprived of diversion, bound to an uncertain fate, Michael nevertheless found that he still possessed a kind of moral freedom. In his book about the ordeal, *The Desert and the Sea*, he writes of the day he decided to forgive his guards. Periodically, he had to recommit to that forgiveness, but he did it, and it likely saved his life and theirs. Without that forgiveness, he says he would've surely tried to grab one of the guards' Kalashnikovs.

In September 2014, Michael's release was finally negotiated. Recently I asked how his views on freedom had shifted. He said he was familiar, of course, with the version of freedom that "belongs to America's idea of itself," causing "copywriters and politicians and all kinds of hucksters to blink the word in neon and sell Americans a bill of goods."

"But there's an inward and an outward freedom," he continued. "I learned that for good in Somalia. Sometimes the outward freedoms, for consumerism and sex or whatever might tempt you, are not good for inward freedoms, including freedom of the heart."

**WHAT MICHAEL WAS** getting at, I suppose, is spiritual freedom. I'm not sure what else to call it, nor am I sure how such a personal version of it scales up to the big, official story America tells about its search for religious freedom — the *Mayflower* and the First Amendment on up through Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores.

Artwork by Kensuke Koike

For every dangerous and autocratic version of freedom, there will also be freedom in fighting that vision.

It was that variety of confusion that got me here in the first place. How did this intimate and often delicate human experience gather the power to justify wars and elect presidents and enshrine guns and market trucks with leather-appointed seats featuring metallic-appearing inserts patterned after acid-wash jeans? I know a successful man with an enviable career that lets him set his own hours and travel the world. He told me the freest he ever felt was nearly four decades ago, at his very first job, inside the dark, liberating anonymity of a Chuck E. Cheese costume. How do you go from that to our big, sprawling capital-F Freedom?

The freedom-industrial complex is enough to make you tune out eventually, and for a long time I did. I chuckled at its kitsch, rolled my eyes at its hypocrisies — the trick of saying "freedom" when something more insidious was meant. But ignoring an idea only gives that idea a pass. I started to wonder: What's up with the American psyche that it still comes running at this strange siren? At some point in my wondering, I came to know a woman who'd been on both sides of the freedom equation. Karrie Garcia had been intensely unfree, and now she beckons others toward freedom herself.

As a girl, Garcia was the precocious daughter of a Bay Area pastor. Her mother was beautiful, her father tall and handsome. Outwardly, they were a perfect family. Inside was another story. Garcia's mother suffered from a crippling eating disorder that governed and eventually eroded their lives — "we lived in bondage," Garcia says. In eighth grade, she was drinking regularly. In ninth, she was using meth. Not long after graduation, she and her boyfriend were sleeping under a bridge.

The decade that followed was a dark swirl of recovery efforts, familial implosion, and a failed marriage. At 27, she found herself with nothing, living alone in a San Diego studio apartment. One day, she got into her car and drove to a stop sign in her neighborhood. She had memorized her local bus's schedule, estimated its velocity when it passed. Bawling, she prepared to pull out into the intersection. Then a voice spoke to her.

*I see everything you've done, and I love you. If you turn this car around, I promise it won't always be like this.*

It was a bright morning in Orange County when Garcia told me this. We were sitting in a small office behind a large church, Starbucks iced tea within reach. Garcia is 44 now. She's married with three kids. When she reached for her tea, I could see the tattoo on her forearm: FREEDOM.

What happened at that intersection was Jesus's acceptance, she said. She turned the car around, drove home, and for the next two years, saw a counselor twice a week. In that time, a new kind of freedom set in — freedom to be her imperfect self, freedom to retire the performance of perfection she felt was expected.

In freedom, by extension, she has found a whole new life.

In two days, Garcia would board a plane for the first stop of a nine-month speaking tour around the country. As Garcia began telling people about the liberation she'd found, it became clear she was striking a chord. It was friends and family first, then bigger groups. Those groups now fill auditoriums, "a community of once-broken, now-liberated women committed to bringing the truth and love of Jesus Christ to all women." Their events suggest a mix of therapy, church, and Tony Robbins.

"What would it look like if we started being really honest about what was going on?" she asks in a promotional video. Judging by the crowd of women swaying and cheering and throwing their arms into the air, it would look ecstatic.

In that video, Garcia refers to "every demographic ... every race/color/religion" being welcome. I pressed her on this — one person's liberty has a habit of stepping on another's, after all. Would my gay friends be welcome? She insisted that her decision to surrender to Jesus meant abdicating to a higher power the job of judging others.

I don't know what it means to surrender to a higher power. But her diagnosis that we are all broken — I'd come to the conclusion this is the realm where freedom operates, too. We are broken from Yreka to Chico to Orange County. For both better and worse, freedom strikes us as the fix. And from there you get your Freedom Laser Therapy and your House Freedom Caucus and, eventually, a president who might plausibly name his tailor the secretary of defense just to show he can.

On my darker days, I fear this coarse vision might prevail. But maybe the comforting truth is that no vision will prevail. Maybe our disagreement over freedom's meaning will save us. For every dangerous and autocratic version, there will also be freedom in fighting that vision, in forgiveness, in overcoming, in finding truer versions of ourselves, in slipping into a rodent costume just when we need it. ✪

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**KENSUKE KOIKE** has exhibited in Germany, France, the United States, China, Japan, and Italy.

**BALINT ZSAKO**'s work has been featured in Phaidon's *Vitamin D2* drawing anthology. His next exhibition will be at the Jason McCoy Gallery in New York this month.

**JAMES ZUCCO**'s work resides in private collections and has been featured in *The New York Times* and *The California Sunday Magazine*.

# Making Cuco Happen

## Omar Banos found fame streaming angsty pop songs from his bedroom. Now he's a model for how musicians can thrive, unsigned. By Dylan Tupper Rupert

Photographs by Stefan Ruiz

**On the summer solstice, Cuco was shooting the video for its next single, "Summer Time High Time," in a chain-linked backyard in East Los Angeles. It's steadily becoming a back-sweat kind of afternoon, and Mu$ty BoYz, Cuco's broed-out film crew, are shouting directives from the sidelines. "I said no squirt guns near the cameras!" Crop-top-wearing teenagers spill out of this prototypical East L.A. party scene: red cups, skateboards, hip kids playing with Lotería cards on a plastic tablecloth, off-duty Nativity lawn décor collecting dust in the storage corner, a rusty barbecue, two chattering Chihuahuas. It's a Gen Z, beer-soaked wonderland sprouting from the highest-percentage Latinx neighborhood in the country.**

This all orbits around Omar Banos, the barely 20-year-old unsigned Chicano singer-songwriter from Hawthorne, California, on a stunningly fast track to stardom. It was only a couple of years ago that Omar graduated from high school when — this was spring 2016 — a single moment of viral fame catapulted his career with such pure teen power that it has awed even the most industrially jaded. The two years since have generated a constellation of buzz-confirming milestones, all achieved independently, including his inaugural run through the major festival circuits. Now it takes only about a week for a new video of his to reach a couple of million views on YouTube. On his Instagram are selfies in front of Apple Music billboards promoting his EP, *Chiquito*, in New York and L.A., with his caption, "Jeez that's big."

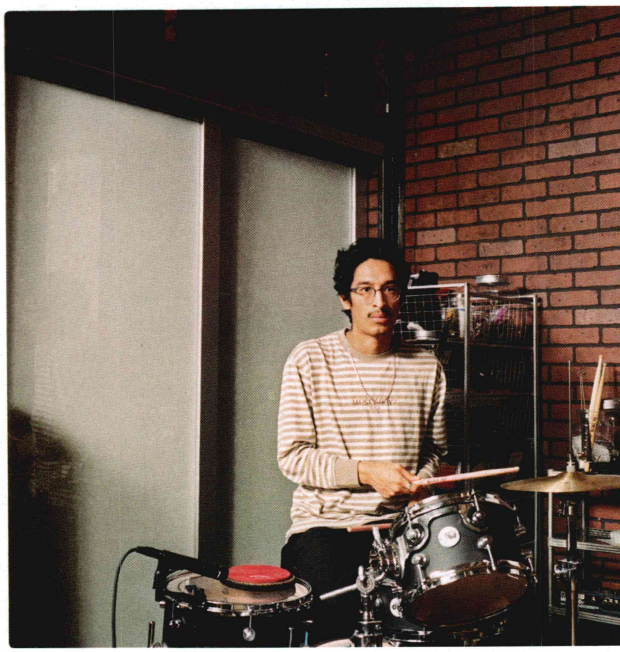
The video shoot is like a real-life page of *Where's Waldo?*, or in this case, Where's Omar?, a cartoon world crammed with brown teens in mom jeans and dad caps, slouching in mismatched plastic patio chairs, waiting around the grill for pollo asado tacos. They spring up when Mu$ty BoYz call action, launching beach balls above bouncing heads of neon hair as a couple dozen kids jump along to the chorus, splashing beer on one another.

I finally catch a glimpse of Omar among his crowd, in his retiree-blue velour polo and short gold chain. He's dancing or laughing or screwing around with bandmates, his glasses jostled to a tilt. For a moment, he looks like the star of the show, as though he's landed on this world he made around his music, a planet populated by kids proclaiming it all a *bop*.

Then the song fades out, and Mu$ty BoYz yell cut. Omar disappears into the swarm of kids just like him.

**JUNE 2016 MARKED** many major milestones for Omar: his 18th birthday, his graduation from high school, and the untimely death of a beloved pet cockatoo. He listened to a lot of oldies that day, as the timeless songs "correlated with the feeling of loss." Omar recorded a 30-second video, a cover of 1959's chart-topping hit "Sleepwalk" by Santo & Johnny, with a metal guitar slide. It's not just a, but probably *the* iconic instrumental anthem of teenage wistfulness.

Omar was already posting videos of himself doing "technical s--- on guitar," which normally would get



PREVIOUS PAGES
**Omar Banos practicing in his parents' garage, which also serves as his recording studio**

thrown up on his Instagram, but this time he posted to his moody Twitter account, @icryduringsex. For reasons explained only by digital hordes of nostalgic teens and a bump from Miami rapper Pouya (who noticed Omar was wearing his merch), it racked up retweets. Omar's face isn't in the frame; it's just his torso, a guitar across his lap, and a teenage boy's bedroom in the background. Essentially anonymous, shy, brooding — an introduction to Cuco's emotional headquarters.

The video was suddenly 20,000 retweets deep. Many of those folks would end up on his page, looking for the kid behind that "Sleepwalk" cover, and find Cuco's original music. Conveniently pinned to the top of his feed was a SoundCloud link for his track "Lover Is a Day," a seven-and-a-half-minute love song about Polaroid romance, his self-worth instantly developed when exposed to the light of love: "Will you love this part of me? / My lover is a day I can't forget." It's the sound of a teenager (at least thinking about being) in love.

In the fall, Omar started community college. By starting community college, I mean he drove to campus, and that's about as far as he got. "I'd be in the parking lot making beats. Both my parents would go to work, and sometimes I'd just go back to the house and work on s--- in my studio," which was first a desk in his bedroom but is now a well-furnished setup in his parents' garage. (These days, he finds the label "bedroom pop" tired, or that it doesn't describe his actual sound, though most of his music was, in fact, produced in his teenage bedroom, for the teenage bedroom.) He posted his next song, "Wannabewithu," on SoundCloud and was beginning to establish his songwriting palette: lovelorn lyrics that toggle between Spanish and English, 808s and heavy reverb, and the melancholia of long trumpet notes, referencing both his childhood influences of the *boleros románticos* his parents played around the house and the middle school marching band he joined to escape PE.

His streams racked up into the thousands, seemingly overnight, before he had even played a single show. Between fall 2016 and spring 2017, Omar performed his first gigs in basements and backyards. These shows were unusually crazy because the fan base — mostly Latina teenagers, who, perhaps for the first time, had found a house-show heartthrob in this nonthreatening, dorky-cute Chicano boy, to whose songs they could sway and sing along to in Spanglish — was already crystallizing. It was a direct digital growth: He posted online; kids posted up.

People were traveling for these shows, remarkably — not only across L.A. and Orange County, but from places like Salt Lake City. It helped that these gigs cropped up in a robust

Members of Cuco. From top: J-Kwe$t on keyboard, Liano on drums, Esai on bass, Breeze on guitar, and Omar

Latinx indie underground in Los Angeles and its suburban outskirts. But this scene of small-scale rappers and garage bands hadn't quite seen a single pop artist cause this much concentrated attention before, online or off.

**ENTER DORIS MUÑOZ,** then 23 with twee bangs and rosy cheeks and a job at a talent agency. She was repping a "very white Swedish major-label pop artist at this time," she says in a deadpan that suggests that wasn't exactly her passion. She discovered Cuco online, and her managerial senses tingled. She started scrambling. DMs and emails were sent, with no response ("I only recently got into the habit of checking my email every few days," Omar admits).

She tracked his next show to a house in Commerce in February 2017. Just two days earlier, she'd bought a domain name to establish her own company, mija mgmt. She had her eyes on her first marquee artist and was getting anxious. It looked like Steve Lacy and Kali Uchi's team had their eyes on him, too. In a go-time effort to get in front of Omar, Doris pulled an impressive feat of freeway pilotage: She went early to the house show in Commerce ("Sorry, Cuco isn't here yet!"), jetted 20 miles to the Roxy in West Hollywood for the Swedish artist's gig, showed her face (professional obligation), then sped back to Commerce to just barely catch Cuco's last few songs. The sprint, and this scene, left her breathless — "200-plus Latinx teenagers singing every single one of his lyrics ... coming out of a garage? This is wild!" — and bolstered her intuition. She felt that this, not the industry show at the Roxy, was her scene. Or, maybe, she wanted to make this scene the one that gets invited to the Roxy.

She convinced Omar to get lunch the next day at a taqueria. They didn't even eat. Instead, they talked for hours over aguas frescas about how she noticed something special was happening here and that she wanted to manage him. They instantly got along, but how did Omar know Doris was legit and not all talk? "Two days after I met her, we're at the Columbia Records building" meeting with Doris's friend in A & R.

It's not only that Doris loved Cuco's music and that Omar dug Doris, it was that their childhoods were also uncannily alike. "Me and him kinda went through similar things, where I was the only natural-born citizen in a family of undocumented folks from Mexico, and both of his parents came here from Mexico undocumented as well," Doris explains as she turns to Omar in the window seat of their favorite family Mexican restaurant in Hawthorne. "How old were you when your dad had to leave and come back? How long was he gone?"

"I was, like, 15, 16. It was, like, three, four months."

"His dad had to go back to Mexico in order to fix his situation, and it was just him and his mom."

"We didn't know," Omar said. "It could have been less time. It could've been more time."

"It's things that typical privileged white America will never have to fear: that one day their entire family will be ripped apart by ICE. Or, him not knowing when his dad was going to come back. Having that fear that your mom is gonna be cursed out by this white lady because of her broken English. Or little s--- like that. You're used to those fears because you're an immigrant kid. You see your parents breaking their f---ing back, working night and day, to just put food on the table for you. He lived in a garage for a minute. How long were you guys living in the garage for?"

"Till I was, like, 8."

"That's how you had to grow up."

"It makes you feel like the minute you start f---ing up, it's like, *holy s---*," Omar says, eyes down. "If anything goes wrong in your life, it's a bitch to get back."

I ask him what those pressure points are, and he responds with a refrain he's already repeated a couple of times. "Being able to stabilize my parents is the main thing I'm trying to do. Give them financial stability, pay off their mortgage. Once we get that distribution money from AWAL."

AWAL, or Artists Without a Label, touts itself as an "alternative to the traditional record label for independent artists," a service that essentially gives musicians a la carte tools that a recording contract would typically promise. They handle distribution,

This scene of small-scale and quite seen a single cause

BELOW
**Doris Muñoz, Cuco's manager**

OPPOSITE
**Band members in Omar's parents' backyard**

rappers

garage bands hadn't

pop artist

this

much

concentrated attention

before.

while the artist retains ownership of the music, and offer direct connections to streaming services and placement on discovery playlists. In a typical recording contract, access to all of this is baked in, but the label owns the music, imposes a timetable and production quota, and leaves marketing and promo to in-house teams that may or may not be as invested (in budget or excitement) in the record.

While Omar has found nascent success through independence, he remains pragmatic. "I'm just making music. At the end of the day, if it works, it works," he says, "and if it doesn't, you know, it's not the end of the world. I can do so much aside from being an artist, like be a producer. My foot's in the industry, so it's not impossible for me."

"You're not going anywhere anytime soon," Doris assures him. She is determined to make Cuco capital-H Happen. "I didn't have a Cuco when I was a teenager. These kids have it, though," she says. When she was younger, she was called "whitewashed" for being into indie rock. "Like, why is that" — whiteness — "synonymous for having an alternative music taste?" She's cognizant of Cuco's potential to break down those kinds of micro-marginalizations. Plus, her for-the-culture drive keeps Doris pushing. "I was in the pop system, but what he's doing is so unique and pure

to our community. So it's like, *OK, how can I utilize the resources I was able to build while working in this system and try to amplify this in a genuine way?*"

Shortly after their aguas frescas meeting, Doris was let go from her job, and along with it, her boss's promise to pay for her parents' legal fees so they could apply for citizenship evaporated. Her mother had been petitioning her visa for 20 years, and her appointment for status adjustment was up. So Doris put together a benefit show at the Hi Hat, a 300-cap venue in the gentrified Latinx enclave of Highland Park in Los Angeles. She called it Solidarity for Sanctuary. Cuco headlined the show — its first one in a proper venue — and sold it out, covering half of the costs that Doris needed to raise (it's now a recurring event series that Doris hopes to turn into a regular emergency fund for families like hers).

"2017 was a blur, dude," says Doris. "I feel like I blacked out." A video recap on YouTube of a show at the Echoplex in L.A., of hundreds of kids jumping and chanting in unison to his music, included a post-show comedown recap with Omar in disbelief. For fans to line up around the block, pack the room, and sing along to all the words at an artist's first few shows is, obviously, not that normal. At first, "he was like, 'Is that too crazy, too fast?'" Doris recalls. She and Omar side-eye each other at their old expectations.

As "one hundred percenters," with no samples, no other producers, and no other writers, Cuco receives all streaming royalties in full. Those famously pitiful fraction-of-a-cent plays finally start to work out when you have several tracks streaming by the millions. Doris attributes part of this to Omar's self-incubated musical gifts — she doesn't need to pay an engineer if Omar's the one cutting the track with his own tools, and she doesn't need to pay studio fees if the studio is the garage of his parents' home. They've also bypassed the need for a contract as a jump-start, since his audience grew without marketing from a label.

Cuco's is a poster-child narrative for going unsigned in the age of streaming: bypass the hassles and risks of traditional models, assemble your own entrepreneurial team, record on your

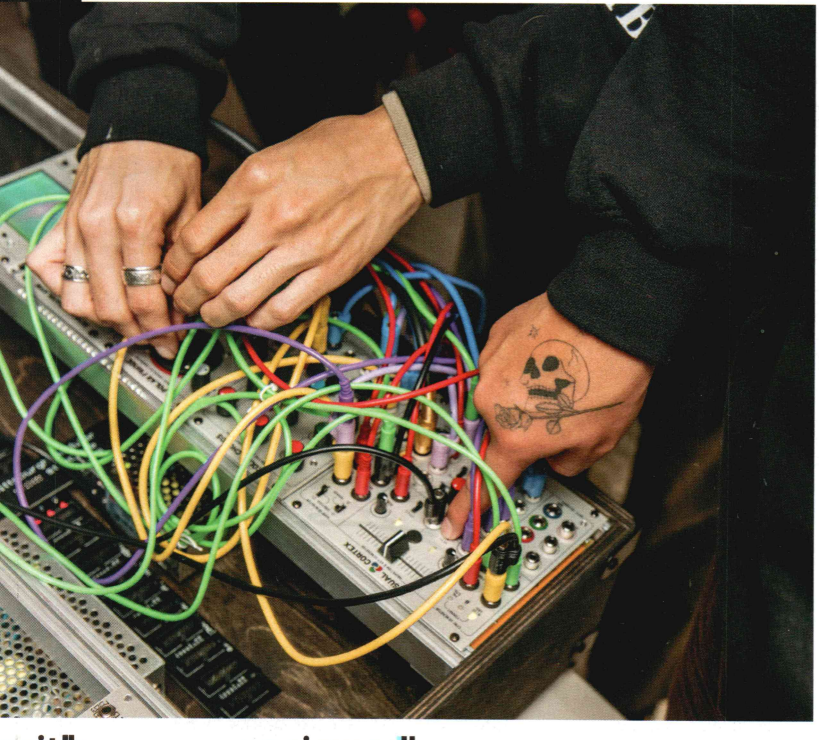
Recent moves by Spotify, which is now inking licensing deals artists, and which launched music division that the giants are directly if not replace,

own timetable. But in the music business, independence isn't entirely synonymous with freedom, as streaming services now dictate much of how an unsigned artist (or any, for that matter) becomes popular. Recent moves by Spotify, which is now inking licensing deals with unsigned artists, and Apple Music, which launched a global music publishing division in 2018, indicate that the streaming giants are trying to directly compete with, if not replace, the major-label system (in which three labels — Warner, Universal, and Sony — control 80 percent of the industry).

Maybe that future of a new kind of "unsigned" existence allows more flexibility for artists at pivotal points in their careers; maybe it further consolidates power in the industry to an even smaller cabal of gatekeepers, simply replacing one group of corporate behemoths with another. For now, these newer pathways toward unsigned pop stardom are working out for Cuco and Doris. At the very beginning of their partnership, Doris got Omar into A & R meetings, to be greeted with lukewarm enthusiasm about how to market an indie-pop Latin artist. Too niche, the labels said. As Cuco's profile grew and its market became palpable, the majors started coming to Omar with offers. Doris, though, saw only short-term appeal.

"The cute check from a label before Christmas would be tight," she says, "but is that necessary?"

As Omar puts it, "We kind of made whatever the label system was gonna give us, you know?"



Tinkering with a video synthesizer

with unsigned
Apple Music, a global
publishing
in 2018, indicate
streaming
trying to
compete with,
the major-label
system.

**IN 2017, OMAR RELEASED** a mixtape, *Songs4u*, and followed it up with his biggest hit to date, "Lo Que Siento." Doris claims it was his real breakthrough, with a rapid-fire accumulation of seven-digit streams on SoundCloud and seven on Spotify, outplaying his other tracks by a few million clicks.

The song is a lovebird dedication of warbly guitars and singsong rap verses, where Omar swaps Spanish verses and English bars. Today, one could take sensitive boys in hip-hop for granted, assuming that the SoundCloud wave of underage emo rappers plus Drake would have cleared the way for Cuco. But Omar still gets some flak. "It's very normal for me to be expressive and emotional because that's the music I listen to," he says, listing off the emo bands of his youth, like Being as an Ocean and Capsize (with whom he was in the studio, thanks to a Twitter exchange of mutual fandom). "As a guy, especially being Mexican, machismo is a thing, and they don't always want you to make romantic music because that's not manly of you, or whatever bulls---.

"I think, now, people are starting to be more open to my music because they are starting to understand that it's not just the music, but it's also the representation I'm trying to give, the total opposite stereotype that exists. I'm going against that," Omar says and then shrugs. "I made the beat in, like, 20 minutes."

Doris gleams. "It was the song that changed everything."

Shortly after *Songs4u* dropped, Omar went on the air at L.A.'s indie radio station of note, KXLU 88.9 FM. All three phone lines rang off the hook before, during, and well after the show, accumulating 78 missed calls — a record. The ones that made it through were tearful teen girls in disbelief — "Oh my God, is this Cuco?" — and boys thanking him for being sensitive and vulnerable on tape. "This isn't just indie fame," host Mukta Mohan later told her friend Rene Contreras, promoter of the Viva! Pomona festival, urging him to pay attention to this bubbling feeling of potential celebrity.

Contreras gets a lot of local credit for establishing a space for Latinx and Spanish-speaking bands in the indiesphere, a homogeneously

white sector of the L.A. music scene. "Five, six years ago, the idea of Spanish music was very much *rock en español*, which is Spanish rock music," he explains. "It's not a bad thing; it's just outdated and unrelatable to younger generations that speak Spanish." When a trip chauffeuring a band to a music fest in Tijuana exposed him to an indie scene like the one he was part of in Los Angeles — except it was full of young, creative Mexican kids — "it opened a whole new portal of ideas for me." He brought that inspiration home to Southern California and started Viva! Pomona to fill the "huge void for Latinx voices in these communities.... There wasn't a place for kids to identify with being, like, both a rock fan and a Mexican person."

His booking strategies — let's fly in this cumbia band from Chile, or have this bilingual local rapper co-headline with a white rock band from Seattle — had a percolating influence. He now books Coachella's Sonora stage, featuring up-and-coming acts, mostly local and Latinx groups. It was a no-brainer to invite Cuco to headline Viva! in 2017, realizing this kid was the symbol of much of what he was working toward. "He went viral on the internet, but he also stays true to understanding the DIY ethos and Spanish-speaking upbringing, living in the United States," Contreras says.

It's not just Omar's dream to be Cuco; it's lots of folks' dreams to help make Cuco possible. Especially, of course, Doris's. "Omar's putting out his debut album this year, and when he played me some of it, that s--- just gave me chills," she says, her eyes becoming saucers. "Man, this kid deserves everything. When it comes to 2020 awards season, I hope he knows he has a real-ass shot.... There's no reason the momentum should stop."

**AT MI ZACATECAS**, a family Mexican restaurant in a strip mall across from Hawthorne High School, Omar's pushing around beans and rice on a plate that he regrets ordering, since his mom

"We kind of made whatever the label system was gonna give us, you know?"

had made him food before we all met for lunch. We're on his home turf but talking about the road, about whether touring has provided any revelations about what this career is actually like.

He sighs. "F--- yeah, dude. Dude, I dread my life, when we get back to the hotel from the venue at, like, 2 in the morning, and we gotta be up at 4. We gotta be in the van, and then we have to drive.

"I'm finding funny ways to manage touring and all that s---. Having my girlfriend on the road definitely helps a lot, but she's going back to school this fall, so I need to find another coping mechanism." He corrects himself. "Not coping mechanism, but I gotta figure out a way to keep myself more mentally sane, because touring is ..." he yawns, "f---ing crazy. I don't know. Dealing with everything that's going on in my head, I'm too prideful to go get help, which makes it worse, so I don't know how to deal with the things going on with myself."

Inside Omar's bedroom, where he first started recording music. The piñata appeared in the "Summer Time High Time" video.

There are moments on tour when it feels like a massive road trip with your best friends, where you play music to packed rooms of adoring strangers. But those moments round out to a few hours a day. The rest of it is a grind of gear-loading, sound-checking, van-napping, little privacy, early wake-up calls, last-call nights, booze, and fast food. Doris talks about how Omar could easily get "lost in the sauce."

He might not be a natural fit for this part of the job, but he has authentic support. His family is close, and Doris gladly assumes the caretaker role on the business side. "I don't wanna burn this kid out. We've talked about this." When opportunities present themselves, she asks, "Are you sure you wanna do this? Let me know — are you really sure?"

"Being a phenomenon scares him," Doris says. "He's learned to be more accepting of this happening to him." Accepting, as opposed to embracing? "In certain spaces, onstage, he embraces it. Offstage stuff, how do you navigate it? Who teaches you how to navigate it?"

Despite touring's slog, his live shows manifest what Cuco means, culturally. "When we went to Texas for the first time, or the Bay Area," says Doris, "I felt like I saw the same community of kids no matter what city we went to. He made it very clear, every show, with this spiel of how tight it is to see a sea of brown kids and that all sexual orientations and gender identities are welcome as well, and this is your space. This is for us." Except for Cleveland. That, they profess, was a lot of white people.

Omar vacantly gazes past my shoulder, neglecting his frijoles, visibly drained by the topic of tour. Doris comforts him, cooing, "Guess what? The next real tour will be a bus." He perks up.

"We can afford that now?"

Doris nods.

A few months later, Omar and his band were on the last leg of touring for 2018. En route to a show in Tennessee, a tractor-trailer slammed into their tour van, causing injuries of varying severity to everyone in Cuco's crew. Omar spent the following weeks tweeting depressive realizations about the fragility of life. The rest of 2018 found him essentially under house arrest for his injured leg, giving him the time to re-record the material he lost in the accident. Remarkably, he is still on track to self-release his debut LP this year. The band canceled the rest of the fully booked fall tour, which would have taken them across France, Spain, and Mexico. →

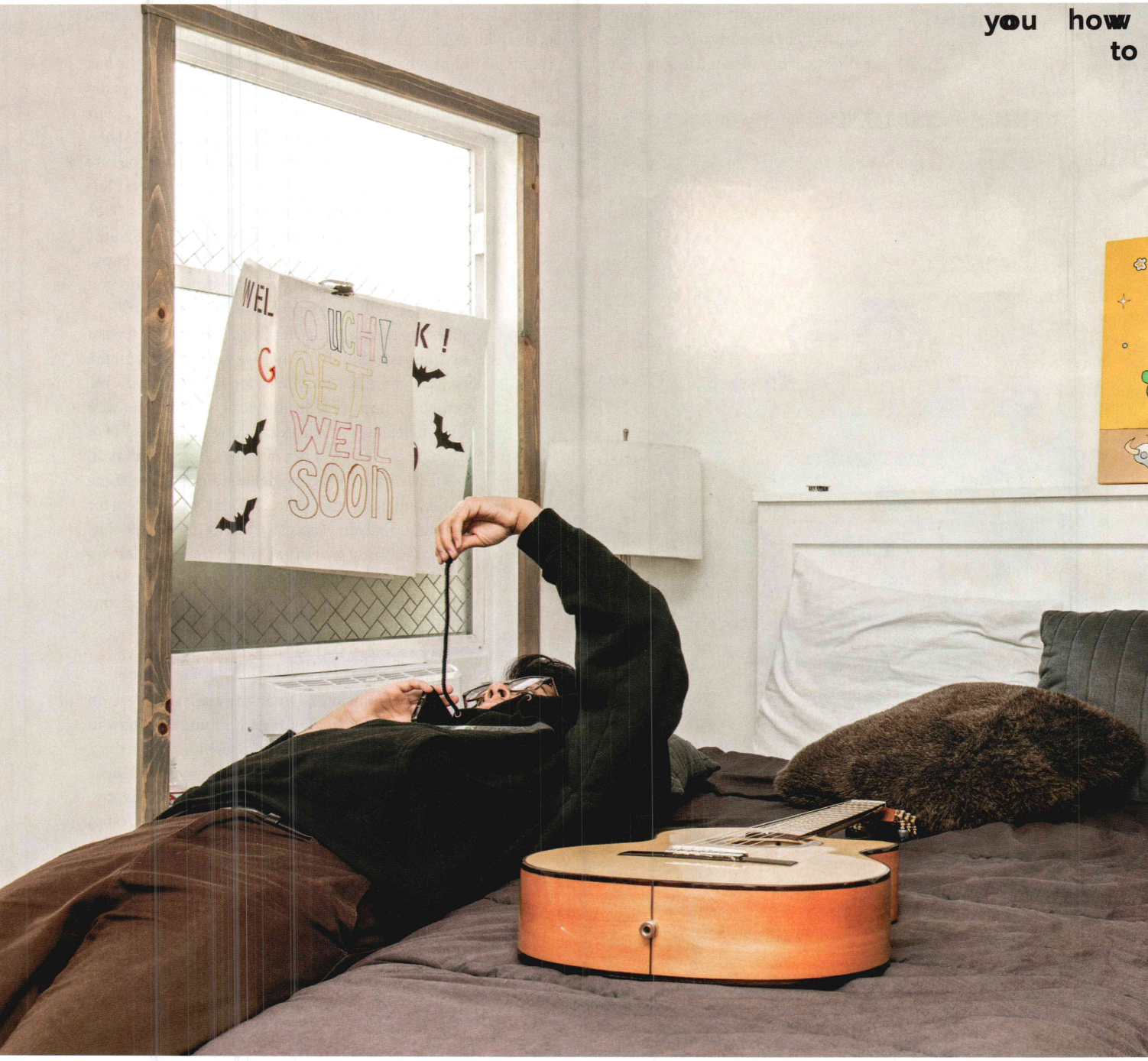
It was a huge and terrible learning experience — perhaps one in maintaining backup hard drives, but mostly about the vulnerabilities and risks in this volatile job — for someone only two years into his music career. For every argument that Omar is some kind of pop prodigy, there's an equal and opposite reminder about his youthfulness. Last summer, I saw him at the Shrine Auditorium near USC — 6,000 seats and, apparently, the "largest proscenium stage in North America." Cuco was opening for Portugal. The Man, a veteran group with a Grammy and a multiplatinum record, who blew through a finely tuned, professionally produced two-plus-hour rock spectacle.

In the stark light of comparison, Cuco looked exactly like what Cuco is: a group of boys barely in their 20s, softly bopping in place on a massive theatrical

"Being a phenomenon scares him. In certain spaces, onstage, he embraces

Offstage stuff, how do you navigate it?

Who teaches you how to



to her dad on the line. She hangs up, and he calls right back; she sweetly apologizes to me before shouting into the receiver, "Ask Chelsea. I'm not home. I don't know where the keys are! Yes! OK! Bye! Love you." Omar floats in through the tarp and right to Jailene and, as if I'm not there, asks her for a kiss. (Several weeks later, I see a video of Omar crying onstage at a Lollapalooza after-party while performing "We Had to End It.")

I locate Doris again, who is also casually luxuriating in her element as a friend braids her hair under a tree. Breathing in this snapshot of Omar's teen dream, I ask her about what's next. "It's crazy to even think it could even get that far, until we're sitting there waiting to hear his name at the Grammys. I can imagine how Selena's family felt when that happened. The fact that people always compare them, too. In every space we go to, they haven't seen a crossover like this, like Selena. Obviously, it's a very different spectrum of it all, but why hasn't there been another person like that?

"Omar deserves a seat at that table," she insists. "Who else would be in that lane with him?"

I sit back in the folding chair and scan the periphery. I spot Omar alone, curiously apart from the clusters of his chattering, Modelo-chugging friends in the only empty corner of the backyard. He pulls a lighter out of his pocket and holds it to the wick of a firecracker he seemingly materialized out of nowhere. He lights it, mumbling a curse as he burns his finger on the flame. Within an instant, it cracks the air with a loud pop, making everyone in the backyard jump with surprise. Even him. §

it.

Above Omar's bed is a painting by Ugly Primo, which was used as the cover of Cuco's EP, *Chiquito*.

stage, reciting the tracks they rehearse in their garage in the afternoon. They did that well, but that stage was a much larger space to fill than a teen bedroom or a backyard. They looked swallowed by the size of their potential.

That night, I checked my Instagram Stories to see Doris's pop up in my feed. It's a side-stage snapshot from sound check with the caption, "dreams come true!" and a sparkle emoji.

**ALL OF THE EXTRAS** at the East Los Angeles backyard video shoot are sweating through their streetwear, competing for this one sliver of patio shade whenever the Mu$ty BoYz yell cut. Doris and I hide behind the cameras to claim a bit of it. It seems like we're the oldest folks here, so taking the shade to rest while we work feels like cashing in a seniority card for us ancients in our mid-20s. I'm leaning in to hear her over the din of dozens of sun-delirious, partying teens.

She imagines what it's like in Omar's head. Doris locks in my gaze. "You're in this place where you had to grow up really fast. Your career exploded in a year, and you have all these —" her eyes dart to the action behind me. I look over my shoulder to see a piñata of Omar's face rising up on a rope from the roof of the garage. "Oh my God, this is so tight! I'm sorry, this is too cool!" She scuttles away to absorb the moment, squealing. "That piñata looks so good!" The director shouts action, and Omar, blindfolded and wielding a baton, bashes his own confetti face. His friends rush in, gleefully clamoring in front of the camera for falling Vero Mango lollipops.

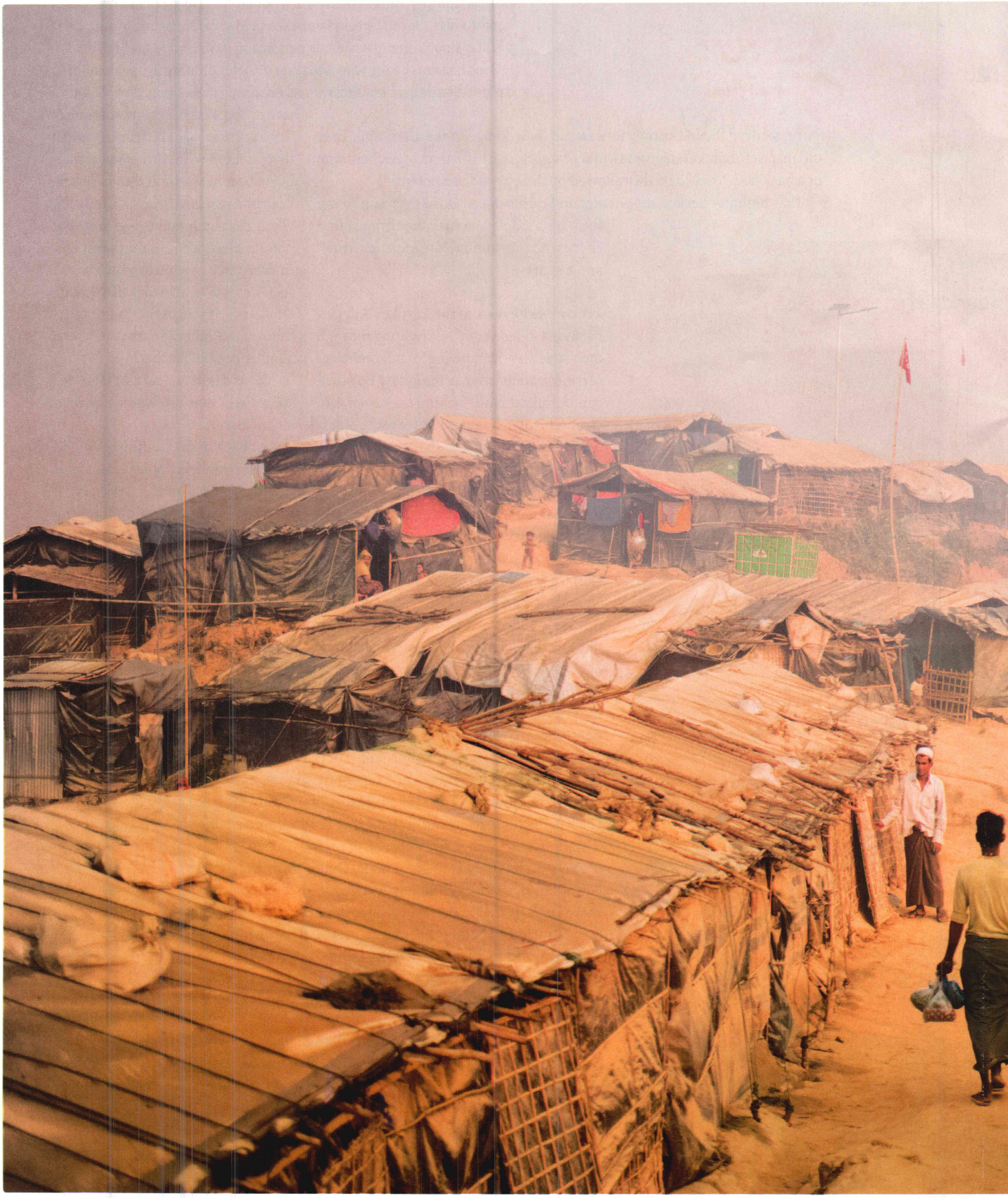
Deserted by Doris, I mingle and spot Omar's girlfriend, Jailene, jutting around with her iPhone getting prime behind-the-scenes shots. Her nail art is mauve with square tips and clear rhinestones at the cuticle; in a gothic font, one hand spells "OMAR," the other "CUCO." I catch her by craft services, which is a tarped-off table under the covered car park, scattered with empty bottles of soda and whiskey, Trader Joe's snacks, and languid kids ripping bong hits around a box fan.

They've been dating for a year, and she has accompanied him on tour, selling merch and booking hotels. She loves it. She tells me he's come so much more into himself over the past year of his life. He seems happier, more confident. Suddenly her phone buzzes — "Oh my god, so sorry!" — then she switches to terse teen talk in Spanish

**DYLAN TUPPER RUPERT** is a freelance writer in Los Angeles covering music and culture.

Originally from San Francisco, **STEFAN RUIZ** is now based in Brooklyn. Aperture will publish his next work, a book of portraits, this year.

**"After we married, I would ask him,**



Part of the Rohingya settlement in Cox's Bazar in southeastern Bangladesh

# For Rohingya women in refugee camps, marriage is both an escape and a trap.

BY WUDAN YAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY SALMA ABEDIN PRITHI AND SARKER PROTICK

**For decades, the Rohingya people, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar, have been stateless. Denied citizenship in their homeland, where they've been persecuted by the military, hundreds of thousands — the majority of the population — now live in refugee camps in Bangladesh. The women in these camps are expected to marry. For those who marry Bangladeshi men, the unions offer the hope of security — food, income, citizenship for their children. Some find love. But more often, marriage turns out to be complicated, even dangerous.**

SANU ARA, 17

My family decided to leave Myanmar because my father built a mosque without informing the authorities, and they started harassing him. First, we lived in a village in Bangladesh. When Bangladeshis told us that Rohingya are not allowed to stay in the villages anymore, we moved to the camps.

Two months ago, a friend of ours brought a man to the house. The man knew her husband — they both sold fish in the camps' markets. He was tall and handsome. He told me that he was a Rohingya, and he asked my mother if he could marry me. My mother and I said yes as long as he wasn't already married to someone else. The man swore by God and the Holy Quran that he was unmarried.

We stayed together for 15 days, and on the 15th day, we got married. He gave me some jewelry, and a few days later, he took it back. He said he borrowed it from someone, and he would buy it for me again later. When we married, I didn't know that he was a Bangladeshi. People told me afterwards. When I asked him, he confessed. He said, "I told you I was Rohingya because I wanted to marry you." He said he would make me a citizen of this country.

Twenty-five days after we were married, I learned that he had a wife. One evening, he told me he was going to go home to his village. But the next morning, he didn't come back. I heard a rumor that he was sent to prison because he married a Rohingya. I don't think he's ever coming back.

A., 18, A ROHINGYA

**At around 10 in the morning on August 25, I had finished my morning prayer and I was cooking soup with dried fish. My house was set on fire. Suddenly, people were running everywhere. The military was shooting at people. There were eight of us in my family, myself included. We all ran. I didn't know where my parents or brothers or sisters went. I later heard they were killed. I'm the only one in my family who survived.**

**I couldn't bring anything when I ran from my home, but I had my brother's mobile phone. I called M. — we had just talked a few days before — and told him, "I lost everything here, including my parents and brother. Please save me." We hadn't talked a lot. I felt like I didn't know anything about him, just that he and my brother were friends.**

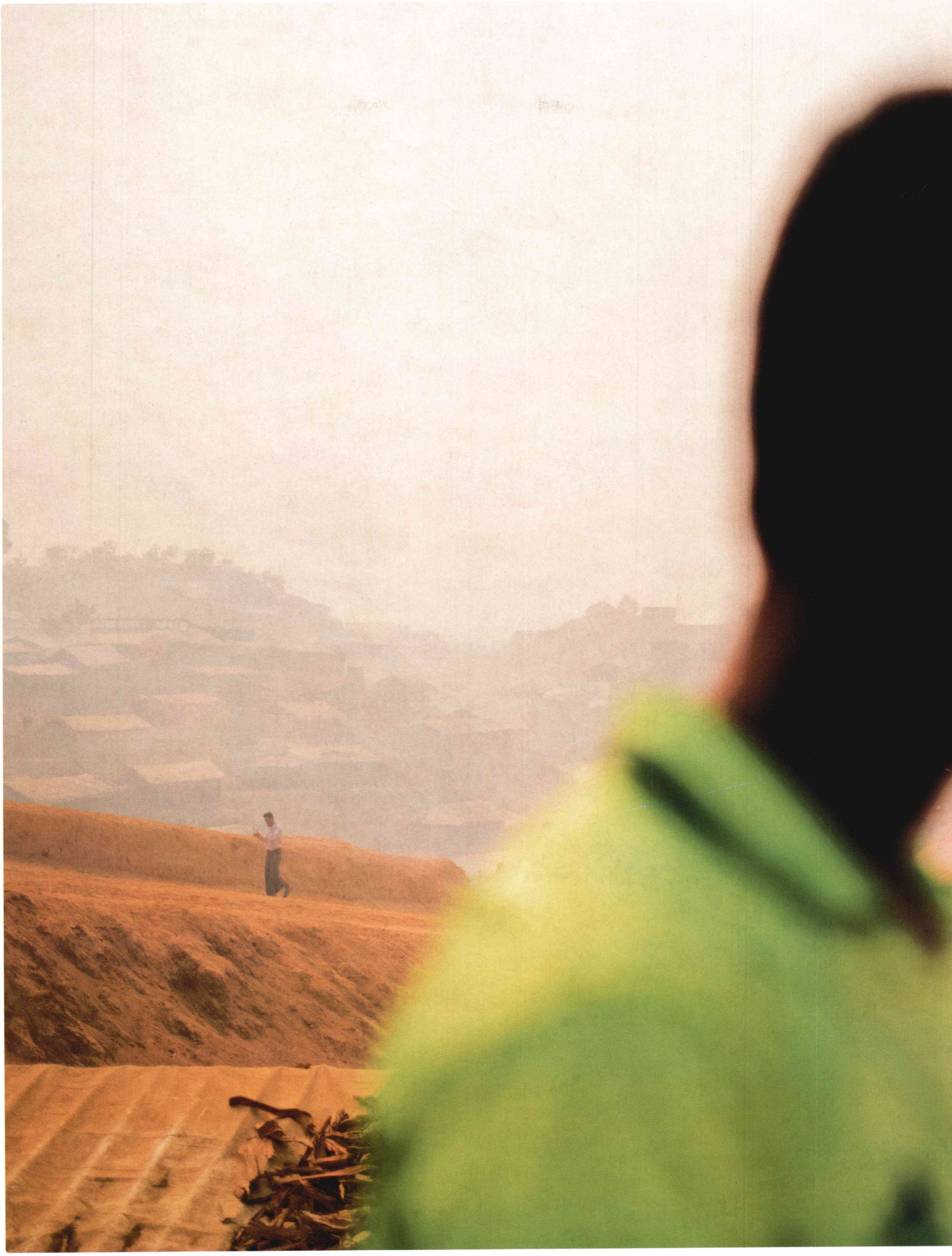
**When I first arrived in Bangladesh, I was like a sick person. I couldn't walk well. I didn't have any injuries, but the journey was hard — especially the part in a canoe. I appreciated that M. and his family protected me. That's why I decided to marry him. Originally, I was hoping for an arranged marriage, like my parents had planned, but by marrying my husband, I found peace.**

M., 23, A BANGLADESHI

I had a Rohingya friend who lived across the border. One time when I called him, his sister picked up. After talking to each other a few times, we fell in love. She had a nice way of talking.

At around 4 in the afternoon on August 25, 2017, I got a call. It was from A., my friend's sister. She said she was escaping to Bangladesh. She arrived here around 8 p.m. My sister and I went to meet her. She was with about 50 other people. She looked pale. I brought her home, and after four months, we got married. It didn't happen earlier because she was traumatized. I wanted to be considerate. When she was ready, she told me.

There was no wedding ceremony. Our marriage was not registered. My hope is to eventually get her citizenship.



TOYABA BEGUM, 32 OR 33

**When I first saw my husband, he was wearing new clothes and seemed smart. He became friends with a man named Amin, who lived near me. He sent Amin to my house as a middleman to convince my mother to let me marry him. For nine months, he protected us from harassment and brought vegetables, meals, and household items. Finally, my mother agreed.**

**After we married, I would ask him, "Will you abandon me?" I knew he had another wife. He would say, "I married you not to abandon you. I married you to live with you forever."**

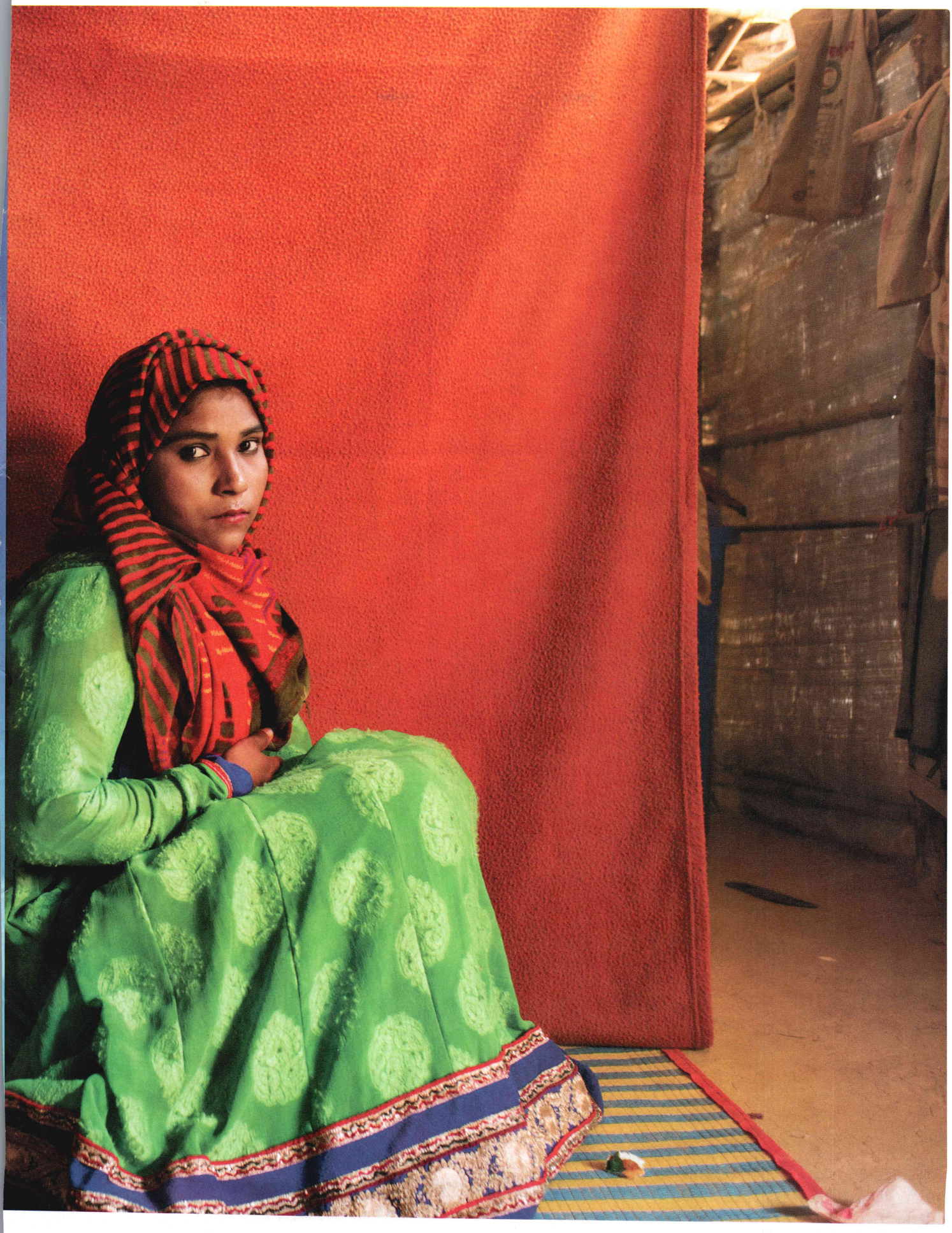
**For 12 years, he sometimes stayed here, and he sometimes stayed with his first wife. When he was living with me, I was happy. But after I had three children, he told me to go with him to live with his first wife, which was also closer to his family. I had visited my in-laws before, and they hated me because I'm Rohingya. I knew the move wouldn't be good, so when I told him I could not go live with his first wife, he divorced me. I felt like I had lost my eyesight. I was not able to see the way. I had three children — what would I do with them?**

R., 19

My brother-in-law and my now-husband prayed at the same madrassa. My brother-in-law must have mentioned me because one day, my husband called and asked, "How are you?" And then later, "Do you like me?" I said yes. We talked on the phone every day.

After two months, we decided to meet at a restaurant. I took a rickshaw. Our meeting was just for seven minutes because I was going to another village and didn't want to run into traffic. I left thinking that I'd ask my sister-in-law to convince my parents to let him marry me. If I married him, I could have a better chance for education and health care — everything.

We thought we would live together, but my in-laws did not accept my family. So my husband visits twice a week. He works as a shopkeeper and brings everything: rice, fish, meat, and vegetables. Everything is perfect. My only hope is that someday my in-laws will accept me. It depends on Allah.



A food-distribution point near the Balukhali refugee camp in Cox's Bazar

SHAJEDHA BEGUM, 30

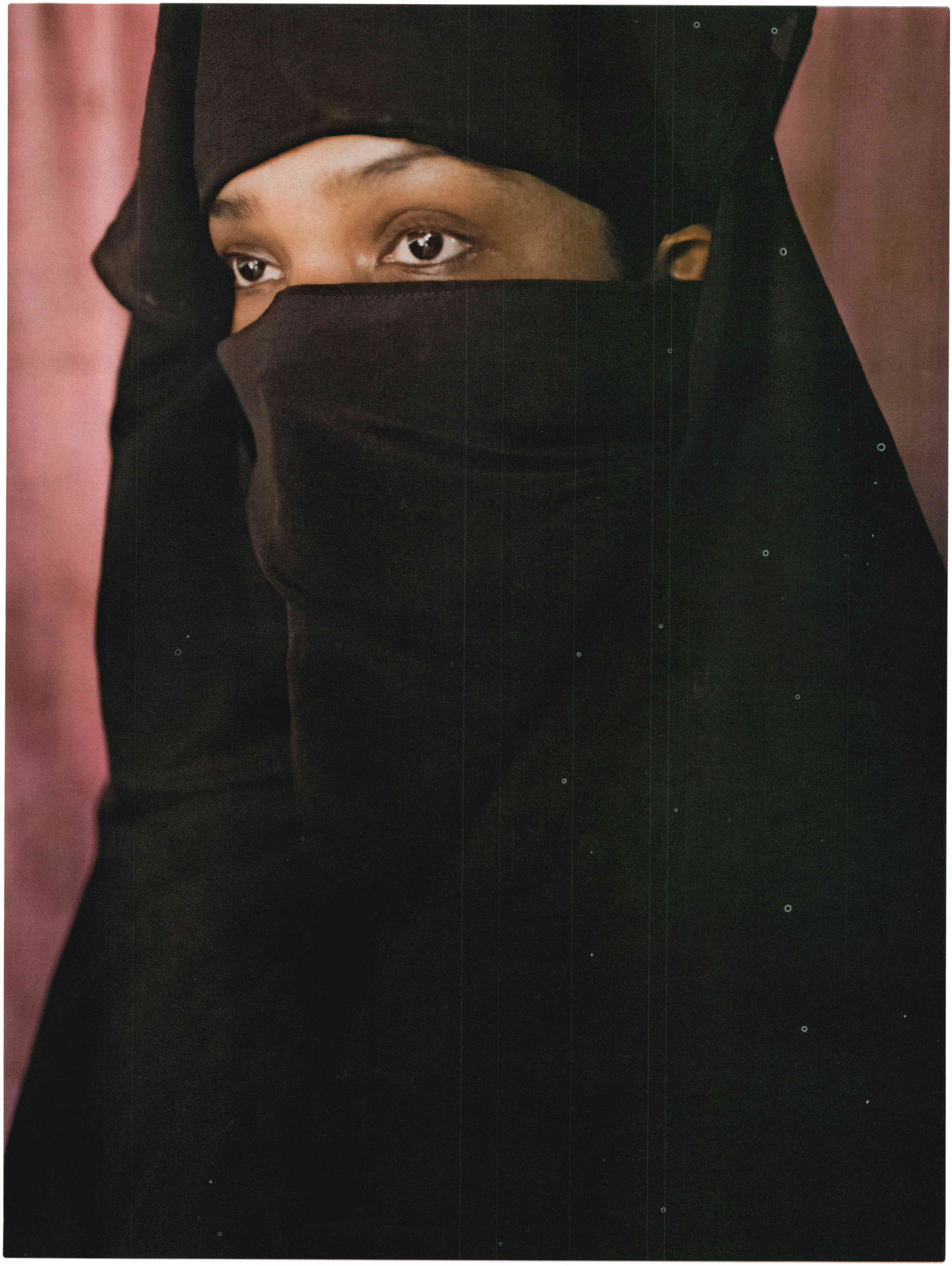
**One day when I was shopping for clothes, a man came into the store, grabbed my hand, and forced me into his rickshaw. He took me to a village a half-hour away and said, "I brought you here so I could marry you. If you do not agree, I will kill you." I was so scared. Four days later, he took me to a house in another village. He called it a house, but it was a hotel. We signed a marriage certificate there. I made a copy, but he took it.**

**We were married for four or five years. During that time, he visited once a month. He had another wife. He would bring me fish and vegetables, but only enough for a day. I had one child with him — my son is now 6. My husband did not even come when he was born. When my child was 1½, he kidnapped him. My son was still breastfeeding at the time. A woman who resolves marriages between husbands and wives helped bring my son back. I don't know how. I just know I got my son back. To this day, my child doesn't know who his father is.**

**WUDAN YAN** is a journalist based in Seattle.

Bangladeshi artist **SALMA ABEDIN PRITHI** started her career as a television reporter and presenter. She studied photography at Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in Dhaka.

Born in Bangladesh, **SARKER PROTICK** is a recipient of the Magnum Foundation Fund grant for his work on the colonial history and partition of India-Bengal. He is a 2019 Lightwork artist in residence.



It's 5 a.m. The moon is still high in the sky, and the Flower District in downtown Los Angeles is open for business.
Hans has worked here for nearly 30 years.
"People still walk in here - same comment: 'You must love what you do. It's pretty.' And it is pretty. We work with a pretty thing. But it's labor-intensive. And it's dirty. Flowers are dirty.
I hate Valentine's Day. It's demanding something from Mother Nature - to produce 5 to 6 times as many roses. Everybody wants it to be red. Red roses..."
RANUNCULUS (HANS'S FAVORITE FLOWER)
THESE ARE FROM ITALY.
"See all this? 20% is an order. 80% is a gamble."
Rose Bundle $30.00
Erick grew up working for his dad at the market.
FOR CUT POPPIES, SEAR THE END OF EACH STEM WITH A BLOW TORCH TO KEEP SAP FROM ESCAPING & ALLOW THE FLOWER TO DRINK.
"Mother's Day is busier than Valentine's Day. Everyone has a mother. Not everyone has a Valentine."
POPPIES (ERICK'S FAVORITE FLOWER)

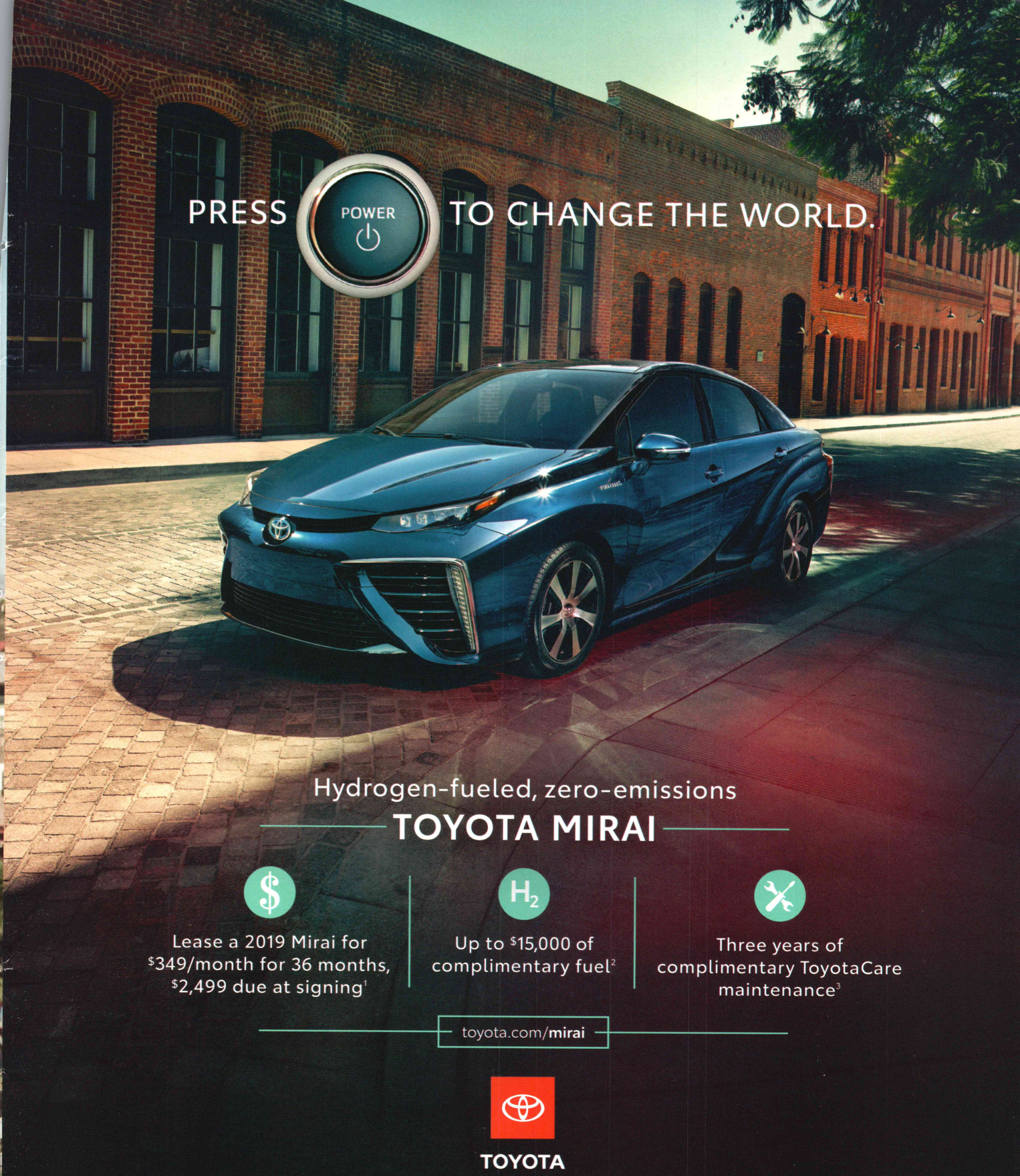
In two warehouses in Los Angeles, roughly 100 wholesalers in the Flower District peddle blooms from all over the world. If it's in season, they have it. If it's not in season, they import it from somewhere else.

With nearly 300,000 visitors each year, the flower market serves everyone from event planners and retail florists to tourists off the street. Many of the vendors have worked there for decades and can tell you which flower is freshest, which will last the longest, and what they have in purple.

BY HALLIE BATEMAN



*Hallie Bateman is a freelance writer and illustrator living in Los Angeles. Wendy MacNaughton's "Meanwhile" column will return in our next issue.*

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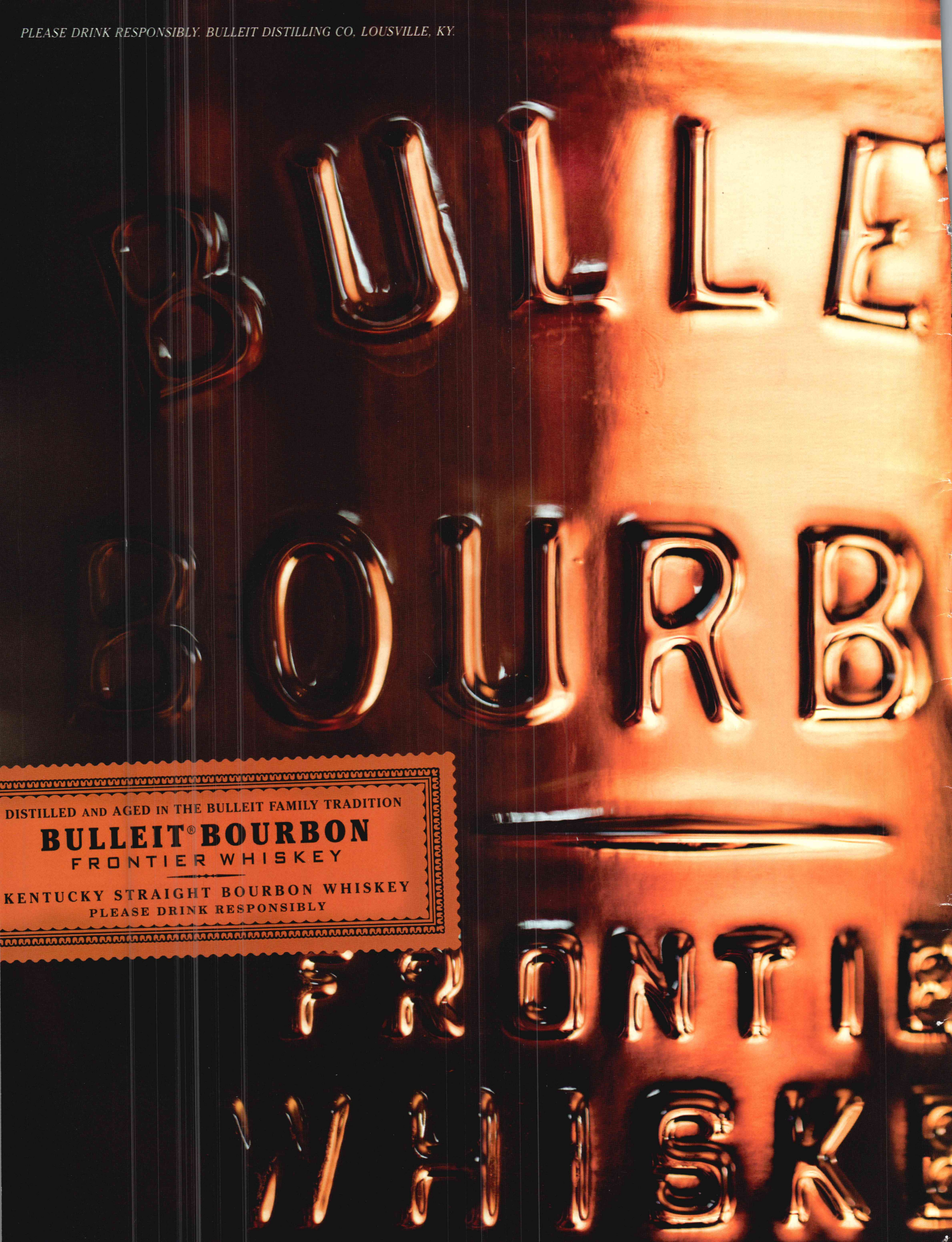
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